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THE

UNDOING OF JOHN BREWSTER

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OF

JOHN BREWSTER

BY

LADY MABEL HOWARD

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THE UNDOING OF JOHN BREWSTER

I.

JOHN BREWSTER was on the last stage of his journey home. The dog-cart was speeding along the well-remembered road, and he was rejoicing in every detail of what was before him. It was a September evening, the day was a long way on, and deep shadows were already thrown on all the low-lying country. His hungry, home-sick longings were all satisfied, and his heart full of rejoicing as he drank in the high, pure air, and revelled in the vivid colouring of the landscape, fresh from yesterday's rain; the grass green as in summer, the trees just touched with autumn-brown, and the deep blue of the mountains, with their rushing streams gleaming in the

sun. He had been away eight long years, and home meant a great deal to him just now. Every turn of the road brought with it a memory: a covert, a farmhouse—each had its own association, and reminded him of long ago. The dog-cart swung down a long, steep hill, up a sharp pitch, and brought into view the old castle which had been the proud possession of his maternal ancestors during many past generations, and where his uncle now lived. A massive grey building, with its high, thick tower, on which was flying the red ensign—a solid, silent record of many centuries, a monument which each succeeding generation had loved and clung to, and which watched them all pass by. Beyond, forming a background, lay the rising park, with its huge pastures and bent larch woods; and behind that again, the great, shadowed, grey mountain finished the picture.

"Lord Empill is at home, I suppose?" He looked at the groom as he spoke.

"Yes, sir; I believe so," answered the man

They passed the lodge, turned a sharp corner, drove along outside the park wall for a mile, and then turned in at a long, low gate up a short drive bordered by yew hedges. John Brewster felt a thrill of excitement pass through him. It was, he thought, almost worth while having been away so long. He could not have believed it possible that he should care so much. The square, fifteenth-century manor house came into view, with its stone mullioned windows and latticed panes; and the old pear tree was still there, still green. He was a boy again; all the intermediate time was as if it had never existed.

Some one saw him, and rang the old bell as he drove up; and almost before he had touched the ground his mother's arms were round him.

"My boy at last," was all she said. "How are you, mother?" from him; and together they passed up the winding newel staircase which led into the large dining-hall. The table was laid for dinner at one end, and

the other end, which was divided by a large tapestry screen, was furnished as a sitting-room—a deep armchair, an oak settee, tables covered with books and flowers. On the rug lay a large deer-hound, which rose at their approach.

Time had been kind to Lady Catherine Brewster; there were more streaks of white in her hair, and her face was perhaps a little more lined, but the eight years had treated her well. They stood there, mother and son, true representatives of their race; she, one of those women who have seldom known a day's illness, healthy, upright, born and bred in the rugged north, a type of border birth, with all the prejudices and obstinacy of the race. Lady Catherine Brewster was a woman of strong character and rigid determination. Brought up by a strict Presbyterian mother, and a father of almost equally evangelical creed, these creeds had clung to her and coloured her life. She was a woman of an intensely affectionate nature towards her

family and intimate friends, but she alienated many by the severity of her principles and her narrowness and bigotry with regard to religious matters.

John and Hilda were her only two children, and she had devoted herself to them with an affection which left them no sense of the lack of a father. She had had a hard uphill struggle. Her husband had been a rising barrister, and was just beginning to make his way at the Bar, when a few weeks' typhoid had brought it all to an end, and she had been left with a few hundreds a year. Her brother, Lord Empill, had let her have Burton Hall for a nominal rent, and here she had lived. It had been a great struggle; but she was a brave woman, and had borne the privations with endurance, depriving herself of almost necessaries of life in order to educate her children. John had shown exceptional talent, and had gone through Charterhouse with flying colours, with a view to the Diplomatic Service; but as his uncle had offered to put

some money into a sheep-ranching business in Australia, with a man he knew and thought well of, Lady Catherine did not dare refuse the offer, although she had always felt he was too good for it. It came at a moment, too, which helped to lead to this decision, as John had been attacked by brain fever, and it was the unanimous opinion of the doctors that the open-air Australian life would be the best and surest cure, and so he had gone. It seemed to her that everything came too late. Six years after he had gone an old aunt of hers had died, leaving her an unexpected legacy; and to John, also, she bequeathed a large sum. Lady Catherine wanted him to throw up his business at once and return to her, but he felt it would be hard on his partner, and she had pleaded in vain. But although he was longing for home, he had stayed on another two years, helping to pull round the estate; and even now she was dreading to hear him tell her he had not left it for good. He was more changed to her than he could

have imagined. He had left her a tall, slight boy of twenty-two, and he had returned a broad-shouldered man of thirty. The privations of the first six years, the disappointments, had left their mark, and the boy had vanished. Still, he was hers, and she jealously hugged the thought that there was no one between them; he had come back as he had left, hers alone, and in the first great joy of reunion the lonely, longing years were bridged over, and she felt as if a deep wound had been suddenly healed.

John threw back his head, took a long breath of satisfaction, and once more stooped and kissed his mother.

"Ah, it is good to be at home! I never knew till now how badly I wanted it; it seems to fill up all the cranks. Where is Hilda, mother?"

"She will be back on Monday," answered Lady Catherine. "You originally said Monday, and so she arranged to stay with the Gorhams till then, and thought she would still be in time to welcome you."

"I meant to stay in London, but when I got there, I felt the clothes and other things I wanted must wait, and home I must come. London was horribly hot and stuffy. I felt I could not bear it. But, mother, how charming you have made this room! The oak panelling and the pictures—they are new."

"It is wonderful what a little money will do," said Lady Catherine, with a sigh. "You know, John, I have bought this place, and everything one does to it is done to some purpose. I found the oak panelling in an outhouse, and as they have no room for any more at the Castle, your uncle gave it to me; and the pictures"—glancing round—"these four early Italian ones were left me by my aunt, and that Hoppner, too."

"It is wonderful," remarked John, slowly, as he looked round, "what a power money is. It is so much against the grain to have to come down to think so, but you have no idea what a few hundreds mean to us out there ranching; it changes the whole world, and

takes the sting out of much. I never understood, till I felt the want of it, how bitter and helpless one can be."

His mother looked at him. "I always felt you had a hard time. But you would not complain, John; and if you had done so, I am afraid I could not have helped you."

"It is all over now, anyhow," remarked John; "and I dare say it has been good for me. It has certainly made me much more lenient and understanding towards others. There are so many more temptations to the poor than to the rich. I can sympathize with thieves even, I think!"

His mother laughed, but looked a little shocked. The conversation drifted into other quarters, and both were startled when the dinner-bell rang. John jumped up, expressing himself frantically hungry; and Lady Catherine taking his arm for support, the two vanished up the stone staircase which led from the dining-hall. The doors upstairs were shut, and there was silence in the old house.

II.

JOHN'S toilette was not of long duration, and he shortly found himself back in the dining-hall ensconced in the big armchair, from where he had a good view of the whole room. In their absence a fire had been lit, and the logs burnt lazily on the large, open hearth. The parlour-maid went backwards and forwards, putting finishing touches to the dinner-table, and John watched all with a sense of restful pleasure. The flickering fire threw light on the oak panelling, and lit up the gleaming white dress of the lady in the Hoppner picture. The red-shaded candles, the dinner-table with its silver dishes heaped with fruit, the Chelsea bowl of sweet-peas in the middle, all gave him great satisfaction. In a moment it was all obliterated, and his

surroundings of the last eight years were before him—the big ground-floor room in his Australian house, the rough wood floor, the hard chairs, the dinner-table with only the bare necessaries on it; no flowers, no daintiness, nothing to please the eye—and he began, like his mother, to regret the eight years during which he had lived with his best instincts and artistic tastes choked and stifled. His face assumed a sad expression as he dwelt on it. John Brewster's face was a very remarkable one. His forehead was low and broad, and his eyes were blue and deep set. His short, fair beard almost hid the lower part of his face, but in spite of it you could see the determination of his mouth. He gave you the idea of a resolute man; there was no obstinacy, only an extraordinarily gentle and open expression. His fair skin was tanned almost to a warm brown, and his great height and broad frame made him appear physically stronger than he was. He had a great many acquaintances and a few great friends, but

till now no woman had come into his life; so little had he been touched, that one of his friends had once accused him of being heartless and cold-blooded. He had smiled at the attack, but had agreed so far as to confess he had had no experience, for as yet he had never seen any one who had given him a moment's quickening of the pulses beyond a passing glance of admiration.

"Asleep, John?" His mother passed her hand over his hair. "Dinner is ready, I think, and you must want it badly."

He rose, and they took their places at the dinner-table.

"You can't think," he began, "how I am enjoying it all. So often, mother, I have pictured you sitting in this room, and it has made me long to be here; every little thing is an immense pleasure to me. It sounds so foolish, and one must have a small mind to feel it, but even eating off a pretty china plate is a pleasure, and I never thought I could have admired a silver spoon so much as

I do this one. Am I a savage, or only a 'hopeless nineteenth-century epicure'?"

His mother smiled. "I suppose, like everything else, it is having to do without things which makes you value them; but, thank God, it is all over now, and you can forget you ever went there."

"Ah, no," said John; "one can't get rid of those years, or rather the effect of them, so easily. I shall have to go back, too. I couldn't leave Charlie struggling, and I promised him I would go."

His mother's hand trembled as she poured some water into a glass.

"I am old, John," she said, "and it is a long way off."

But he did not answer, and, after a few minutes' silence, he changed the conversation by asking after his uncle.

"I forgot to tell you," said Lady Catherine, "that I accepted luncheon for you there to-morrow. Empill and Mary were so anxious to see you, that I thought this would be the

best plan; and Mr. Maddock, the clergyman, is coming here to luncheon, and I know you don't care about him, so I thought you would be glad to miss him."

John laughed. "Absence makes me feel kindly towards any one, mother, and perhaps your parson may have softened his views during the last eight years."

"Not at all," answered Lady Catherine, gravely. "I see little innovations I don't at all approve of, and it is a great regret to me that Hilda encourages him."

"Oh, Hilda has a turn that way, has she?" asked John, carelessly. "But I really don't think it matters much about those little things if he works his parish well; but you always were a bit of a bigot, you know, mother."

Lady Catherine smiled. "I don't like these innovations, because you never know what they may lead to; and I think the remark of the Scotch doctor the other day, when he was telling me of some one who had become very High Church, was very true—

they seem to forget the Deity in the ordinances."

She rose as she finished speaking, and went out of the dining-hall into the sitting-room beyond, where coffee and cigarettes were waiting.

John lit a cigarette, and smoked it without speaking for a few moments.

"Is Mary Empill married?" he asked suddenly.

His mother looked up surprised. "No; there has been no sign of anything of that sort with her. Why should you ask, John?"

"I don't know. She was a very nice, attractive girl when she was eighteen, and I was wondering she had not married. I suppose she has too good a time keeping house for my uncle. She has a good many of the advantages without the bother of a husband."

"I believe," said Lady Catherine, "there was some one a long time ago, but I never heard much about it, and I suppose it came to nothing."

"How well she played and sang," said John. "Oh, mother, come and play to me—anything—scales if you like. I have heard no music, except on the ship coming home, for eight years."

"My fingers are stiff," answered Lady Catherine, "but I will try, John; you must not be critical. Hilda will play for you. She is an excellent pianist. She learnt in Dresden."

She opened the door as she spoke, and went back into the dining-hall, where the piano was standing.

"Another proof of the legacy," said John, as he lit the candles; and then went to the fire while his mother played soft, low melodies.

A little air of Schumann's, a movement of one of Beethoven's sonatas, and then little old-fashioned airs—airs of childhood—which made him young again, rubbed out all the rough bits, and made him feel as if the toil and bustle of life was a long way off. His

mother stopped suddenly, blew out the candles, and came across to him.

"John"—he could hear her voice was full of tears—"it is ungrateful of me when I know I have you back again, but the thought of that long separation was too much for me, and I cannot help feeling that everything, somehow, has come too late."

John rose from his chair, and put his arm through hers, but there was a touch of impatience in his voice.

"Regret is useless, mother, and it is so unlike you to regret what was inevitable. You did the best you could for me, and if we began life over again we should probably do the same; anyhow, I am home again, and I have no room now for regrets. So, cheer up, mother. Who knows but what the best is before us? Talk to me a little; tell me of your life all these years, of Hilda. There is much I want to know; everything is news to me."

He threw himself into the armchair, and

she sat down quite close to him with his hand in hers. They had so much to say, this mother and son. He told her of his life on the other side, and her hand unconsciously tightened on his, and he felt two large tears drop on it, as he told her of the first two years, when he often went to bed hungry, and sometimes even could not write home for want of money for a stamp. But she knew, too, that it had purified and perfected his character; and though the fire threw light on the deep lines on his forehead, she could not regret them, for she felt that it had made him the man he was. They sat far into the night, forgetting time, and only conscious of the deep joy of being together again—mother and son.

III.

SUNDAY broke with a bright sun and a cool wind, bringing with it a reminder of autumn. The little basket carriage came to the door as John remembered it of old, and he drove his mother to church. As they passed the Castle lodge, they came upon the inmates coming out—Lord Empill, tall and large-framed like his sister, and his daughter walking with him, a brown-haired girl, with an attractive face and large grey eyes. On his other side walked a tall, striking-looking woman with grey hair. They all quickened their steps as the pony-carriage came into sight, and John jumped out. His uncle grasped his hand.

"Ah, John, what a fine fellow you have

grown! Welcome back! Your mother must be proud of you."

John returned his uncle's grasp, and, turning to his cousin, Mary Empill, stooped and kissed her. She started and changed colour, but he did not notice it. He had always kissed her, and the years had made no difference to him. The tall lady in black touched Mary's arm.

"Will you introduce me?"

Mary turned. "Oh, John," she said, "I don't think you know La Duchessa Sorrinata."

John bowed, but the lady stretched out her hand.

"I am a very old friend of your mother's. We were at school together in France; then I married an Italian, and we lost sight of each other for years."

"I have often heard my mother talk of you," answered John, as they walked on towards the church, Lord Empill and Lady Catherine following.

"And you, John," put in Mary Empill—

"tell us of yourself. How are you, and have you left that place for good?"

"I am afraid not," answered John; "but I am not going to think of that now. How little changed you all are, Mary. I believe I expected you all to have grown old in eight years. Ah, there is Mr. Maddock"—as the clergyman approached in his cassock.

He greeted John warmly. Together they passed into the church porch, John turning back to wait for Lady Catherine.

The church had been a priory; the grey Norman tower had always appealed to him as a child, and it had lost none of its interest. But as he stepped inside he marvelled at the change. The old horse-pews were gone, and plain oak seats had taken their place. The stone walls, which had been thick with white-wash, had been cleaned, and stood in their bare simplicity, in some places rough, but here and there the pointing being very fine. The arched, pitch-pine roofs, sweeping down to meet the great grey pillars, were very effective;

the large east window, with its beautiful glass full of wonderful mellowed reds and blues, was the same. The sun was shining through the side aisle windows, and threw a soft coloured light on the recumbent figures of the old barons of the thirteenth century, lying with their shields and coats of arms blazoned on their breasts. He smiled when he remembered how, as a child, he used to build up his tales on those figures; his mind had been filled with the romance of the Middle Ages, and his childish imagination had regarded them as heroes of righteous warfare, and he had vested them with a halo of courage and noble deeds. Those illusions, how good they were! How they all came back to him as he sat in the old place! He pulled himself together, feeling suddenly he was setting a very bad example to the choir boys immediately in front of him by his curious looks around. He saw his mother highly disapproved of the choral service, and he could not help smiling when he remarked her, with a

stern look in her face, remain immovable in her seat as the choir and clergy filed in.

There was a general meeting outside the church door, and John accepted his uncle's invitation to luncheon. He stayed a few minutes longer to help his mother into the pony-carriage, and then walked slowly up the long lime avenue flecked with sunlight. Mary Empill had waited for him. He paused for a moment, and listened to the hum in the limes.

"I am a child, Mary, but even this noise in the trees reminds me of so much, so many things of long ago. I am enjoying myself so much; you don't know what it is to me to see you all again. I got in despair the last six months. I thought the time would never come to an end, and I began to tick off the days as I used to do at school."

Mary came nearer. "John, we missed you dreadfully. Do you know, I think father minded your going away even more than he did the boys'; and now you are so changed

outwardly that I am quite alarmed, and I feel you can't remember anything inwardly."

"Ah, but I do," interrupted John. "That's just it, Mary. I have lived on those twenty years before I went to Australia, whereas you have been going on living ever since, and probably the last years have been the best to you. I expect I remember and cling to much more in the old times than you do."

Mary shook her head. "No; that's impossible," she said sadly; and John wondered at the sudden shadow over her face.

"Tell me," he asked, "what is Hilda like? When I asked mother, she rather lowered her voice, and said she was very wild, and that's all I could get out of her. Evidently Hilda is a great responsibility."

"She is impossible to explain," said Mary, with a smile. "She is absolutely unlike any one else. She is the maddest mixture of childishness and old age. I have seen her behave like a baby one minute, and like a cynical old man the next."

"Well, she won't be dull anyhow," remarked John. "I am quite excited to see her, and it will be something out of the way getting to know your own sister. Who else is here, Mary?"—as they came in view of several people in the house.

"Donna Carmella Torrini, niece of the Duchessa; Colonel Vivian—that's all, I think. Oh, and you know, John, my brother Ralph, as we call him, lives here now with his little boy. His wife died three years ago."

The luncheon bell rang as they approached the door, Mary explaining that luncheon was always early on Sunday and Lord Empill particularly punctual, and they already found them seated.

"John,"—Lord Empill looked up from his employment of carving beef—"may I introduce you to Donna Carmella Torrini, and will you sit between her and Mary?"

Carmella Torrini raised her eyes, and John, even in the passing glance of an introduction, could not help remarking on the loveliness

of her face, which struck him as being an extraordinary likeness of Raphael's early pictures of the Madonna. Carmella had no doubt a very beautiful face—the eyes and the features were almost perfect; but it was the wonderful look of peace, of rest and contentment, which only a perfectly regulated mind can produce—a mind at rest with itself and its religion. In after times, John often recalled his first meeting with her. He remembered that look in the deep, dark eyes when she looked up; and every detail of the soft white dress she wore, touched here and there with a little blue, remained familiar to him. She was rather like a beautiful picture of a mediæval saint. He felt almost startled when he saw her doing what the others did, and he thought it almost sacrilege to sit next her and talk to her. But he was there, and after a bit a human feeling of wishing to see her eyes again made him turn to her.

"You were not in church this morning?"

Carmella turned her eyes towards him.

"Ah, no," she answered; "I am a Catholic. I went quite early to my church."

Her voice was very low, and had a soft, musical tone, and her English was perfect.

"And," he said, "you found a church? I did not know there was one near here."

"Yes; there is one in Wyburn," answered Carmella—"a small one, and not too well cared for, but still a church, and your cousin was kind enough to send me."

Mary joined in. "Carmella, you never told me. Had you any difficulty in finding it? I don't think the groom knew a bit where it was. I ought to have inquired, knowing you would be here on a Sunday."

"This is my first Sunday in England," explained Carmella.

John was more than astonished. "Your first Sunday in England!" he repeated. "Your English is as good as if you had always lived here."

"Ah, no; my aunt"—nodding to the Duchessa—"was English, and I lived with

her, and she insisted on English nurses; and when I first went to the convent to be educated, it was a joke against me that I did not know my own language."

"How odd it must all seem!" exclaimed John. "What has surprised you most in our English ways?"

"I think your sister," was Carmella's quiet reply.

John started, Mary laughed, and Colonel Vivian looked annoyed.

John looked at her. "Well, from what I hear, she is rather astonishing. But what about her particularly startled you?"

Carmella paused for a moment. "I think," she said slowly, "her conversation and her music."

"Her music is wonderful," exclaimed Mary, eagerly, "especially when she plays the organ. There is a new organ in the hall here, and it is extraordinary to hear her on it. She plays all the most difficult music as if it was nothing."

"Yes," Carmella added in a low voice; "it takes you some way into another world, and one feels as if one had left all trouble behind one."

"Mary," said Lord Empill from the other end, "I think we have finished. Let us have coffee in the hall."

They all rose and passed through the vestibule. Mardale Castle was celebrated for its hall, which was of the most perfect proportions. The long, lattice-paned windows stretched from the ground to the ceiling, and the fittings were of stone; it was panelled three quarters of the way up with oak, where it was joined by early English tapestry. There were some good Vandycks let into the panelling all along one side, and a very fine Titian portrait hung over the chimney-piece. On each side of the large stone fireplace stood rampant griffins holding flags, arms were quartered all round between the panelling and the tapestry, and the furniture was chiefly composed of old oak settees, tables

and chairs, high tapestry sofas and screens; but here and there was a comfortable arm-chair, for, as Lord Empill expressed it, "We can't live exactly like savages." At the far end was an oak gallery, built expressly for the organ. A newel staircase, very much like the one at Burton, went out of the hall.

John turned to Mary. "Cannot you play something on the organ?"

Mary shook her head. "No; you must wait till Hilda comes. We can't do justice to it. If you will all dine here on Friday night, I will undertake that she shall play all the evening. Will you come?"

John accepted conditionally on his mother's joining the party.

The Duchessa came towards John. "I am coming to stay with you," she said in her bright way. "Perhaps your mother has not told you? She asked me to come when my visit here was over."

John glanced at Carmella, a glance not lost on the Duchessa.

"And Carmella is included," she said. "Your mother was good enough to invite her."

"I hope," said Carmella, gently, "I shall not put your mother out. I am rather going where I was not asked."

"I am sure she will be delighted," was John's answer.

But he secretly wondered that his mother had consented to let a Roman Catholic within her doors.

"We shall come on Saturday," said the Duchessa, as she gave her hand to John. "Excuse me running away, but Colonel Vivian is going to the garden with me, and I shall keep him waiting."

"Have a cigarette, John?" and Ralph Verncourt came up with an open box.

John mechanically took one, but his eyes were centred on the figure of Carmella Torrini as she slowly made her way across the hall into the room beyond. Then he turned and wended his way to the smoking-room, where Lord Empill was waiting for him.

"Ah, this is new," said John, as he looked round the room with admiration.

"New and very old," answered Lord Empill. "The old dungeon, John, transformed into a smoking-room, the only weak part being the want of light. I've made all the windows I can, but the walls were so thick it was almost impossible."

"Well, it's very comfortable, and that's the chief point in a smoking-room," said John, as he took a seat on a cosy couch and lit his cigarette. "Now, Uncle John, tell me some of your stories. Often on Sunday in Australia I have wanted them badly."

Lord Empill looked delighted, and began at once, and the best part of the afternoon was spent before John remembered his promise to his mother of being back to tea. He jumped up suddenly, gave Ralph a tap on his shoulder which woke him out of his afternoon sleep, found his stick and hat, and started home. He walked slowly, and stopped to light a pipe. He seemed to have lived

through many experiences since the morning. The beautifully restored old church had delighted his naturally artistic eye, and somehow Carmella Torrini was quite a new experience. He could not quite understand what he thought of her. He did not altogether like her. She was almost too quiet, perhaps, he thought. She lacked animation, and then, how very odd her remark had been about Hilda. The more he thought of it the more odd he thought it. It was almost rude —no, perhaps only foreign. He was not quite sure he liked it, or her. How cross Colonel Vivian had looked! Was there anything between him and Hilda? Anyhow, as John Brewster walked up the stony drive between the two yew hedges, he felt there were more experiences ahead. He hoped good ones.

"A penny for your thoughts, John."

He almost fell over his mother as she came to meet him.

John laughed. "Nothing interesting;

not worth a penny, mother. Retract, or I may keep you to your word."

She turned and walked back with him, remarking she thought he had forgotten the road home.

"I was with my uncle, and he was so amusing telling old stories that I forgot time, and even now I don't know what it is. Have you had tea?"

"Long ago," she answered; "it is past six. Isn't it a lovely evening, though getting cold? The days, too, are closing in."

They stood together a few moments watching the sun setting over the distant hill, and then they went back into the house.

After dinner that night, John described his visit, and what the Duchessa had said.

"And, mother, I couldn't help smiling when she said you had invited Donna Carmella, who is a Roman Catholic, to stay with you."

His mother looked horrified. "A Roman Catholic! Is she really? The Duchessa ought to have told me, before allowing me to ask

her here. Nothing would have induced me to do so if I had known."

"How absurd!" exclaimed John. "My dear mother, how can it possibly matter? I should not have mentioned it if I had thought you really minded, and I don't think it is at all necessary or likely that the Duchessa should have told you. It never would enter into her mind that you could possibly object."

"It does matter very much," said Lady Catherine. "I can't bear their religion or their ways. I never have had any friendships with Roman Catholics, and I don't at all approve of her being intimate with Hilda."

"From what I hear about Hilda," answered John, with a slightly sarcastic smile, "I should think she is well able to take care of herself."

Yet he inwardly felt quite perturbed at the way Lady Catherine had taken it, and it went far towards spoiling their evening.

IV.

As John came back to the house for luncheon on the following day, after a fruitless search for wood pigeons, he felt quite certain Hilda was before him. A well-worn bicycle was balanced against the old pear tree, and as he stepped into the doorway, he came upon several library books lying on the floor, loosened from a strap which never could have held them with any security, and in the dining-hall he saw Hilda on the rug caressing the deer-hound. She did not see him till Lady Catherine exclaimed, "Hilda, here is John!" then she rose to her feet, and came towards him quite easily, without a trace of shyness or awkwardness, and kissed him.

"It is quite a new thing," she remarked

naïvely, "to make acquaintance with a brother. I thought I was going to be shy, but you came upon me unawares, and I hadn't time; and though I shouldn't have known you if I had met you, still, John, you have the same sort of face as you had, only you look much nicer, and I am sure you would not scratch and bite me as you used to do."

"I hoped I had got over that phase of existence before I left," answered John, laughing. "And what of you, Hilda, all these years?"

"I? Oh, not much. Mother would tell you I am nothing what she hoped I should be, and I know I am a disappointment—eh, mother?"

Lady Catherine owned that she was, sometimes; but, to John's surprise, Hilda didn't seem to mind—she laughed; and they all sat down to luncheon. John found himself staring in astonishment and bewilderment at his own sister. His knowledge of women was so slight, and she was so utterly unlike any

one he had come across before, and she seemed all unconscious of his bewilderment.

"And who is at Mardale?" she asked, after describing her visit in a rapid fashion.

John informed her. The Duchessa Sorrinata and her niece were there.

"Oh, I know," interrupted Hilda—"that girl like Raphael's Madonnas. She is very beautiful, but she ought not to walk about in the world and wear clothes like other people. Well, who else?"

"Colonel Vivian," began John; but he got no further.

"That horrible man who wants to marry me! How can they ask him there? Mary knows nothing will induce me to meet him."

"Hilda, Hilda," remonstrated Lady Catherine, in a shocked voice, "how can you?"

"Well, it's quite true," insisted Hilda, nothing daunted; "and I shan't go and see Mary while he is there; so, John, you can tell her so. You told me, didn't you, mother, that they wanted me to play the organ there

on Friday? I will if he goes, but not unless;" and having delivered her ultimatum, she rose, and proceeded to get the dog's food ready. "And after this," she added, "I am going to the village to see what Mr. Maddock wants in the way of decorations for the Harvest Festival next Sunday."

"Don't you think," asked Hilda, as she and John walked down through the park a little later—"don't you think mother has grown even sterner and stricter than she used to be? More of a bigot, too, in her religion. Of course, I understand she don't approve of me. You see, she sent me to Dresden for four years, and naturally we lived an independent life out there, and I can't come back into pinafores, but she won't see it."

"Well, you do rather over-ride all her lifelong principles, don't you?" said John, good-humouredly.

Hilda laughed—an uneasy laugh; then she came nearer, and spoke quite gravely.

"John, you don't understand. You can't

believe the dreariness of it all, the smallness, the narrowness of the life we all lead here. I should die of inanition unless I read, and played new music, and went a little forward sometimes, instead of always going backwards into gossip and needlework and evangelicalism."

John looked at her. Here was a touch of the other side which had astonished Carmella.

"I always think," he said simply, as he looked away over the grey hills, "it is no use kicking against the pricks. One wears one's self out, and it is so much better to let people remain as they are if they are happy in their lives."

Hilda was suddenly remorseful. "I am altogether horrible, restless, and discontented!" she exclaimed. "If it wasn't for that detestable Colonel Vivian, I could go and exorcise my demon on the organ at Mardale, but, as it is, I must walk it off. So good-bye, John; that's your way. Don't forget to

threaten them at the Castle with my rage;" and, waving her hand, she set off down the other road.

John leant against the iron railings and watched her as she ran down the hill, swinging her sailor hat in her hand, the wind blowing her fluffy hair into her eyes. She was good to look at, he thought, with her blue eyes and fair hair and tall, lithe frame. He turned away, and came suddenly on Carmella Torrini, who was walking, and whom he nearly ran over. A smile came across her beautiful features, and she held out her hand.

"Were you coming to the Castle?" she asked.

John said he had a message for his cousin, and Carmella turned back with him.

"That was your sister, was it not?"

"Yes," answered John. "You are right, Donna Carmella, she is the most curious mixture I have ever seen. She is gone now to the church to see about some decorations for the Harvest Festival."

"I went into your church this morning," said Carmella. "Mary took me to see it."

"Did you not think it beautiful?" asked John.

"Beautiful in itself," answered Carmella; "but oh! so unlike ours, so uncared for, and so little that is beautiful to adorn it."

"I have only once been inside one of your churches," replied John, "and it struck me as very beautiful, and full of beautiful things."

"Ah, but then," she said quickly, and in a low voice, "it is so different! We feel the real Presence always."

John was silent. He was impressed with the wonderful look in her face as she turned to him and said these words, but he felt he could not the least comprehend what her religion was to her, and they walked the rest of the way in silence. Mary was on the lawn in front of the house, and, leaving Carmella, John joined her and gave her Hilda's message, over which she seemed much amused.

"Tell her," she said, laughing, "she is quite safe, as I heard him tell the butler to order a fly for Wednesday morning. Where is she now?"

John explained, and Mary and he went in to tea together. He had no more conversation with Carmella; the Duchessa insisted upon his talking to her, but beyond he was secretly watching Carmella. Vaguely he disapproved of her—disapproved because she was a foreigner, and worse, a Catholic. All the Border dislike and prejudice rose up strong within him as he thought of what were, to him, her superstition and ignorance; but as she sat before him with her wonderful face, he felt angry with her, and angry with himself, because he knew he had never seen any one so beautiful before. He felt he was disgracing himself in the Duchessa's eyes by the stupidity and absence of his answers, and he took up his hat to go. He interrupted Carmella, as she was laughing and talking with Colonel Vivian, by insisting on her

shaking hands with him. As he passed Mary, she rallied him on his early departure, and suggested a game of croquet. But John felt impatient and bored, made his mother the excuse, and, regardless of the disappointment in her face, started home. As he came to the gate where he had left Hilda, he saw her slowly coming up the hill, and he waited for her. She was laden with heavy scrolls; he stretched out his hands and took them from her.

"Texts and crosses," she explained. "I am going to make some in red ivy leaves for next Sunday's Harvest Festival. They ought to look well."

"I should have thought," said John, slowly, "you would have despised all those sort of things. You don't look like decorations somehow."

"My fingers are rather like thumbs," answered Hilda, cheerfully; "but other people's are worse, so they are glad to get me. Did you have tea at Mardale, John? and has that horrible man gone?"

John delivered his message, and added that Mary expected several new-comers that evening.

"And, I suppose," answered Hilda, rather scornfully, "Mary was in a state of fidget. She is a dear, but she does fuss over such absurd things, too; it seems almost impossible."

"I suppose," remarked John, "she has very little else to think of."

"I suppose that is it; but it seems so extraordinary. When I left home at sixteen she was just the same, and when I came back, after four years, I found Mary still wringing her hands over small things. I always try to persuade her nothing really matters. Very few big things matter, and certainly no small ones, and I always say that unless a thing will worry one to think of when one is dying, it isn't big enough to worry about now, and it is extraordinary how that thought helps me."

"What very strange philosophy!" said

John, looking at his sister. "Where did you get it?"

"I grew it," she answered lightly. "Everything that is of any use one has to grow one's self. Cultivate it, John. I can assure you when once you have realized nothing matters, nothing does matter; and, some day, when you awake at three o'clock in the morning to realize some large mountain, remember what I have told you. Ah! there's mother, and she's encouraging Roy to hunt through Uncle Empill's coverts. Roy! Roy!"

Lady Catherine looked up as she heard the clear young voice, and opened the gate out of the park into the garden. John joined her, and Hilda turned off to find the deerhound, so the conversation came to an end, although it left John more bewildered as regarded his sister than before. Her vitality attracted him, while her pessimism depressed and astonished him, and she somehow left him with a vague sense of unrest and discontent.

V.

"I AM quite sure," said Hilda, with conviction, as she finished Rachmaninoff's "Prelude," and left the hall at Burton vibrating with the sounds—"I am quite sure that if Herr Meindeg had heard me play that as I did to-night, he would have slammed the pianoforte on my fingers and turned me out of his house."

She rose with a sigh as she spoke, shut the pianoforte, and gathered her music together. She was alone in the room. Friday night had come, and she was waiting for her mother and the carriage which was to take them to Mardale. She was bored—bored because she had to go out this wet night in her best frock, and bored because she felt her music was going off, and she saw no chance of

getting away to freshen it up. She was essentially a modern girl, and yet with this she combined an old-fashioned idea of home and duty. In spite of her professed cynicism, she had deep down, well hidden, a strong vein of romance, and she was intensely sympathetic towards those who appealed to her for it. She had seen a great deal of John during the last five evenings—he had spent most of the days at Mardale—and she had watched him with great interest. She had long ago guessed Mary Empill's secret. She had begun by wondering that she did not marry when one or two apparently likely people had wished it, and then bit by bit the reason had dawned upon her, and since she had seen them together she had been certain of it. John's utter unconsciousness had astonished her. He evidently had no idea, though to Hilda it was so very evident. As she stood by the fire to-night, the thought of it all ruffled her — Mary's unhappiness, John's unconsciousness. Was he cold-blooded

or only stupid? and if it did break in upon him, would he reciprocate it?

"I don't know that I want it," she said to herself; "but anything would be better than to know he was heartless and cold-blooded. I will play to him to-night with all my power, and rouse him, if he has any possibilities; and if he hasn't—well, then, he must remain as he is, and I give him up."

She was disturbed by the simultaneous arrival of her mother and the carriage, and they drove down to Mardale. John had been shooting there, and had stayed on for dinner. Lady Catherine—always punctual—met her brother at the foot of the stairs, and they crossed the hall into the library. John was already there talking to Admiral Finchley and Ralph Verncourt. Mary came running in, full of apologies for her late appearance; several more guests arrived—Colonel and Mrs. Laurence, Lord and Lady Garvagh, with a daughter. The Duchessa and Carmella were

very late, and Lord Empill, with watch in hand, met them at the door.

Over his head John saw Carmella in a long, plain, white satin dress, and he was hoping she might fall to his share, but was disappointed when Mary touched his arm and told him to take Miss Garvagh in to dinner. She had plenty to say for herself, and kept him busy with a stream of conversation and innumerable questions; but she soon discovered that her world was a closed door to him; he evidently knew none of her friends. Balls, racing, Ranelagh—in none of these subjects could she raise his interest, and as soon as she could she turned to Lord Verncourt, who was quite ready to discuss whatever she chose to put before him; and John, equally relieved, watched his opportunity of talking to Carmella. But it seemed to him dinner was speeding on, and it was a long time before he got a chance. At last there was a lull, and he took immediate advantage.

"How do you like England on further acquaintance, Donna Carmella?"

"Oh, I like it immensely. Every day I find something fresh, and it is all so different from Italy, that it is almost like a new life. Everything interests me, and you can a little imagine the difference in our lives and yours when I tell you I have never been allowed to go outside the garden in the country without a chaperon. I am so often wondering what your sister would do under such circumstances."

John laughed, and they looked at Hilda. There was a sudden lull in the conversation, and they heard her telling her neighbour she hated visiting because she had to sit up late, and never got enough hot water for her bath.

"I can't think what would become of her," replied John, turning back to Carmella, "but I suppose habit makes even that sort of life bearable. But I wonder at your aunt, being English, allowing such barbarous habits to exist."

Carmella shrugged her shoulders. "Ah, there it is — habit again. I suppose she changed countries very young, and she got used to our ways and forgot her own. But much as I like your country and your ways, I would not live here. It is so dark and dreary. These houses"—as she glanced round the dark-panelled dining-room—"would weigh me down. We live in sunlight and brightness."

It was a great delight to John to watch her as she talked. He wanted nothing better than to look at her as she sat there. Now and then a smile flew across her features, but her eyes always remained quite grave, with a curious deep shadow in them. He quite forgot himself looking at her, and at last she took him to task.

"What are you thinking of, you are so grave?"

John started. "I was thinking," he answered slowly, "of what Hilda said to me about you the other day."

"What was that?" she asked lightly.

"She said she was quite sure you have a purpose—an aim in life—something you are striking for and mean to accomplish."

Carmella's pale face caught a sudden glow. She looked into his eyes, and she spoke with great gravity, and her voice shook a little.

"Yes," she said; "she is quite right—I have a purpose in my life." And she glanced across at Hilda and wondered how she had known.

John was speaking to her again. "Will you tell me what it is?"

She shook her head. "Not now. I can tell no one. Some day, if you care to hear, you shall know."

"John"—Mary's voice came from the head of the table—"we must go now. Don't let my father sit too long, or we shall have no time for music, as you know how early Aunt Catherine always will go home."

John nodded. Mary made a sign to the Duchessa, and all the ladies left the room. Mary led the way into the library, and the

older ones followed her, Hilda and Carmella, with one or two others, pausing in the hall.

"I always think," exclaimed Hilda, as she sat on the big iron guard, "that this hall ought to be strewn with rushes, and an ox perpetually roasting in front of this open fire-place. I believe in his secret heart Uncle Empill would have it, only he is afraid of all his neighbours calling him a savage."

"I think it's cold and savage enough as it is," answered Maud Garvagh, with a scornful look round. "I do hate this early English architecture and decoration. Look at that horrible seat Donna Carmella is sitting in" —pointing to an old oak settee—"perfectly straight-backed, hard, and with probably all the oil coming off on her frock."

"I beg you won't move, Carmella!" exclaimed Hilda. "You can't think how well you and your white satin gown look with the dark seat behind you and the big tapestry screen. You really might be early English yourself. I suppose"—turning to Maud Garvagh—

"you would like to paint the oak and cover the tapestry sofas with chintzes?"

Her sarcasm was lost on Maud. She smiled, and said she preferred French architecture and furniture. But at this moment Mary came from the library, and asked Hilda to go up to the gallery and begin to play. Hilda pretended to grumble, said it would be very cold up there, that she was sure the water would not work properly; but she started upstairs, nevertheless, opened the organ, and turned on the water.

The first few notes brought Lady Catherine, Lady Garvagh, and the Duchessa from the library, and the men from the dining-room. John made his way to a tapestry sofa, just opposite Carmella, and he, too, at once noticed the beauty of the delicate outline against the oak. Hilda played softly, almost without expression. She played as if she had been made to play against her will, and the Duchessa began to feel disappointed, and John wondered why they all had talked so

much about it. Then suddenly a change came over her. The organ under her touch rang out; on and on she played, her tone deepening as she went. First she played the happy Meistersinger music, and the "Preis Lied" came with its song of triumph to them. Then she paused for a moment, and the air changed, and a love song of Grieg's came softly across, played so tenderly, so full of feeling, that it took the older ones back and made them young again, and filled the younger ones with possibilities, and touched all alike with a tender passion. Lord Empill felt a sharp touch of pain as he remembered his dead wife as she had been that spring day when he had first known he had loved her. Lady Catherine, in spite of herself, felt her heart-strings tighten, and longed for the happy days she had almost taught herself to forget. She only remembered how few they had been and how soon they had ended. Mary's heart ached as she watched John's face, for she realized that for her that song would

never sound. John felt a new power working in him—the music itself was almost obliterated as he woke to a vague sense of a loving hand stretched out; a sudden flash of passion came across him and stirred him to his depths. It was so novel, so bewildering, that it almost made his brain reel, and he woke to a new life.

Suddenly Hilda stopped, pushed in the stops, and turned round. She eagerly scanned below her the faces on which the shaded electric lamps threw light, and as she caught the expression in John's face she was almost frightened by it. Then she turned once more to the organ, and she played a little soft, simple air.

"I have woke him up," she said to herself, "but I am afraid it will be at great cost;" and she laughed a little mirthless laugh.

But downstairs the spell had been broken, and the tension was over. Lord Empill rose, and he and Lady Catherine walked slowly towards the library, the latter taking his arm, and remarking suddenly in a plaintive tone—

"I do wish Hilda would not play that sensational music; it is such a pity."

Lord Empill bowed, and paused for a moment at the library door.

"Yes," he acquiesced as he drew himself up, and there was still a sharp line of pain across his face; "when I hear Hilda play like that, I feel almost inclined to regret that I bought the organ." And they passed on into the library, and he instantly plunged into a lively discussion on torpedoes, which Admiral Finchley and Lord Garvagh had been engrossed in regardless of the music outside.

Hilda came slowly down the long staircase. As she walked into the hall, Colonel Laurence, who was somewhat of a musician, advanced to meet her, and complimented her on her playing.

"Whenever I hear the Meistersinger," he remarked, "it comes across me that there is nothing really more beautiful—that 'Preis Lied'—the whole music is like a triumphant song."

"I think," said Hilda, slowly, as she walked by his side across the hall, "that I always see music in colour, and the Meistersinger is all blue to me."

Then she joined the others and the general conversation. Carmella sat quite quiet on her oak seat. The music had stirred and troubled her, and given her a faint sensation of something within her; but it passed away, and her face was as unruffled as usual when the time came for Lady Catherine to say good night. Hilda and John followed her, and the drive home was almost a silent one. Lady Catherine expressed herself tired, and walked slowly up the stone staircase into the dining-hall, and asked John to light her candle. He handed it to her. She kissed him warmly, and then paused in her good night to Hilda, who was standing by the fire.

"My dear," she said gravely, "I wish so much you would not play that kind of music. I do not like it, and your uncle is of quite the same opinion;" and with a good-night

kiss she went on across the hall and through the door, which John closed after her.

All the radiance died out of Hilda's face, and her arms dropped rigidly to her sides.

"Isn't it hopeless?" she asked.

John admitted that it was rather hard, and then for a few moments there was silence while he turned the logs over and stirred them into a blaze. Then he spoke without taking his eyes from the fire.

"I suppose I know nothing about music. I am hopelessly ignorant, but your playing to-night seemed to me the most wonderful thing I have ever heard. No; it wasn't hearing, it was feeling; the music seemed to take possession of one. I wonder do you know, when you are playing, all that comes from you? What is it?"

Hilda leant forward, and her eyes caught the light from the fire, and John could see how they lit up.

"Do you know?" she said, speaking eagerly and rapidly. "Have you ever had neuralgia,

and when it begins to get better, the pain seems to go away from you, to *ooze* out, and you seem to be giving it slowly away? Well, that's what I feel; rather as if all the joy and pain and life are coming away from me. They seem to go out through my fingers; and then, if the people who are listening are sympathetic and appreciative, I feel it more and more; and sometimes, at the end, I have felt as if all I had I had given to them, and I have grown quite old and tired."

The fire suddenly died down, and John could hardly see her face; but her voice was trembling with the passion she had thrown into her words.

"It has struck me," he said, after a pause, "you must have had some sadness, some trouble in your life. Do you mind my saying this, Hilda?"

There was a long silence, and then Hilda spoke in a low voice, with all the feeling out of it.

"Yes," she said falteringly; "but it was a

long time ago, and I made a mistake, that was all. I have nearly got over it, except just now and then when it comes back; but as I told you, John"—and she rose suddenly and stood upright, looking down on him—"nothing is worth fretting about, and some day I am going to marry a bishop. I love curates and decorations and dioceses, and you will see in me an excellent bishop's wife." Then she suddenly changed her voice, and sat down on the arm of his chair, and put her hand on his shoulder. "There is one bit of advice," she said earnestly—"a foolish bit, perhaps, from a sister to a brother, but take it well, John, as I mean it—don't fall in love with Carmella Torrini."

John laughed a little impatiently, and rather drew his shoulder away from her touch.

"How very absurd! It is not the least likely. But, for the sake of argument, if I did, what then?"

Hilda got up, and prepared to light a candle. "She will never marry you," she answered

resolutely. "You might think she would; you might build all your hopes on her, John, but she will not marry you eventually. Put it in your pipe and smoke it; I shall never say any more. Good night;" and she unlatched the door and went upstairs.

She closed the door of her room, and threw open the lattice window and looked out. The rain outside splashed on the ivy, and the wind moaned round and over the old house. It was very comfortless. She turned away with a sigh.

"I have done a very foolish thing, I think," she muttered to herself—"very foolish. Perhaps I have put it into his head; in fact, I am sure my music did. Why can't I leave others alone? One always repents of interfering." Then she undressed quickly and got into bed.

Downstairs John sat smoking with his eyes fixed on the dying fire. Though he sat quite still, yet inwardly he was uneasy and restless. Hilda's music, followed by her advice, had

taken root, and he was trying to analyze his feelings. He wondered why she had warned him—in such a curious, earnest way, too. Was he in any danger? Were not the feelings he had towards Carmella almost akin to dislike? Well, after all, he had only known her a week, and she had alternately repelled and attracted him. He had thought her bigoted, narrow-minded, and foreign; and then, her beauty and her restful charm had strongly fascinated him. But why, if he was in danger of caring for her, should he ever feel repelled? Then the truth suddenly bore down upon him, and forced itself upon him. The very feeling of dislike arose from his struggle against the fatal attraction. He knew now that his whole resolute nature had fought a hard fight, and that now he too had to bend before that inevitable power of love. It came so strongly upon him that he rose suddenly. Hilda's warning rushed over him, and he uttered aloud, "It is too late!" Then he sat down again, and tried

to think it over calmly and dispassionately. After all, what did Hilda know? Why should she give herself these airs of knowledge? And he was not even sure whether he wanted to marry Carmella at that moment. It was all too new, too bewildering; his brain went round and round in a maze, and refused to settle; and long after the fire died out he sat, regardless of the cold and the comfortless sighing of the wind, till at last, wearied out in body and mind, he lit a candle and made his way upstairs. As he passed his mother's door, his heart almost stopped beating as he thought what this would mean to her. Perhaps his pausing outside her door, momentary as it was, woke her, and she called "John."

He opened the door, and, shading his candle with his hand, went to her bedside, and kissed her.

"Ah, my boy," she said, as she drew his face down to hers, "each night I bless God for His goodness in bringing you back to me."

Her affection touched him so deeply that he nearly broke into words imploring her tenderness and help; but restraint and habitual self-control came back to him, and though his hand shook as it touched hers, still outwardly he was quite quiet. He gently closed the door, and went on to his room. He put down the candle, and stood for a few moments while he thought it out. Should he go away to-morrow—fly from the danger? No, no; his whole heart, his whole soul, revolted against this. He was crying out for his share, his part, and if he was not strong enough to resist it, then he must give himself up to it. Even his consideration, his love for his mother, were put aside, and his whole being went out to meet this love which had come upon him so unawares, so strangely and suddenly, and which had taken possession of him. When he at last closed his eyes, the daylight was breaking and a heavy grey mist rising gently before the morning sun.

VI.

It was late Saturday night when John got back from Wyburn, where he had been to see his mother's solicitor, and he found the Duchessa and Carmella had already been established some hours at Burton. He had only time for a hasty dressing for dinner, and, hurry as he would, was a little late. As he took his place at dinner, it rushed through his brain that Carmella was here, under his roof, breathing the same air as himself, and the thought intoxicated him, fresh as he was to the sensation of his young passion.

The Duchessa welcomed him warmly, and even Carmella raised her eyes and smiled, which sent the blood rushing through his veins. Lady Catherine was discussing the possibilities of church the following day, and

Carmella was assuring her she should like to walk into Wyburn—it would not be too long a walk; she hoped Lady Catherine would not think about her.

John leant across the table, and spoke in a curiously defiant voice.

"I have arranged it, mother. I have ordered a fly for to-morrow morning, and I will take Donna Carmella in to Mass. We shall be back in time for luncheon, and I can do my church in Wyburn."

"Oh, please don't trouble." Carmella looked distressed.

The annoyance in Lady Catherine's face was so very apparent; but John turned to her, and, in gentle but still resolute tones, answered her—

"It is no trouble. I should like to go, and I rather want to get the letters, which I can only do by going to Wyburn, I think."

Hilda adroitly turned the conversation. She saw John was determined, and she hated scenes; but she could not help being inwardly

amused that Lady Catherine saw an imaginary danger, and was perfectly ignorant of the real one which was confronting her. She played that night at their united request, but she was out of tune with herself and them; the notes jarred upon her instead of soothing, and she felt cross and unreasonable. There were rocks ahead; no one but herself realized them, and she was powerless to steer them clear. Lady Catherine sat stiffly in her high-backed chair, while the Duchessa, quite undisturbed, prattled on of her Italian life. John was ruffled with his mother for having showed her disapproval, and Carmella rather wished herself back at Mardale, where life seemed easier.

John was true to his word, and he and Carmella went in a fly the next morning. Lady Catherine's face stiffened as she watched them drive away; she pictured to herself John going, anyhow, to the door of the Catholic Church—perhaps even going into it.

Meanwhile they drove there almost in

silence. On arriving at the door, she stretched out her hand for her books, which he had been carrying. He handed them to her. She went through the outer door and disappeared from his view. He waited a few moments to give orders to the driver, and then, after pausing, he, too, pushed a side swing-door and entered the church. It was a dark morning, and the atmosphere was heavy with incense. Far down the church he caught a side view of Carmella on her knees, and he could just catch her beautiful profile and the rapt expression in her face, which was turned towards the High altar. He sat down on a chair in the side aisle, and listened and watched with great interest. The intense reverence and heartfelt worship struck him as very wonderful and beautiful. He watched some of the poor people—there was a community in Wyburn of Irish Catholics, who worked in the paper-mills, and they formed a large portion of the congregation—men with threadbare clothes and tired, worn faces; girls,

shabby looking, overworked, and thin; but all alike falling down and worshipping when the "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus," rang through the church, and he, too, fell on his knees in humble worship, the beauty of it and the reverence touching him profoundly; and as they passed him in coming out, and he saw Carmella cross herself with holy water, his whole soul felt ennobled, and he rejoiced that he had been present.

After luncheon, Hilda announced her intention of going up in the park to see a park shepherd's wife, who was ill, and whom she had promised Mary to visit. She suggested to Carmella that she should accompany her, and John declared his intention of going with them. They started through the garden gate and up into the park. It was one of those afternoons which goes to make England what it is, when the autumn had claimed the colouring, but the summer had come back in the gentle breeze—a cloudless, deep blue sky, the ruddy autumn tints deepening in the

glowing sun, and the mountains resting in dark shadow, with their rugged outlines very blue and clearly defined. John led the way through a big larch wood, and from it they emerged on to the ledge of rocks known as Summer Ground. Carmella burst into an exclamation of admiration at the panorama. The park lay below them, with its undulating green pastures, and the picturesque Highland cattle dotted here and there. Beyond lay the heather pastures, giving a rich brown to the landscape, and in the distance the great deep blue mountains standing in the silence, from where the gentle wind seemed to come and blow fresh and cool to them as they stood there.

They all three stood gazing silently for some moments. Then Hilda realized her object, and, turning round, waved her hand.

"Will you wait here? I must go on to that cottage"—pointing to a small house almost hidden in a larch wood. "I will come back when I have done;" and she went away.

John pulled the wooden seat nearer to the edge of the cliffs, and made Carmella sit down on it, and sat down beside her.

"I always think of this view with great gratitude," he said, after a long pause. "It is here I used to come with all my childish troubles and sorrows, and the mountains used to comfort me. I always wonder, if I brought a real trouble here now, if they would still help me; and when I am old and tired, I think I shall come here and make my peace with God and the world."

Carmella shook her head. "Ah, no; it is too vast, too distracting! I could not feel that. It is very English, that feeling of yours. You must always have space and air, you English people."

"I think," said John, lightly, "that perhaps our religion appeals more to nature than yours does. You would go into a convent—shut yourselves up in four walls. But that would drive us mad, I think."

Carmella did not answer for a moment,

and then she slowly pulled a letter from her pocket.

"You remember," she began nervously, "the other day, when you asked me if I would tell you about my purpose in life, I said some day I would? Do you like to hear it now?"

John turned eagerly to her. "Yes; of all things I should like to hear. I have so often thought and wondered and conjured up all sorts of things. Please tell me."

She hesitated for a moment, and then began in a low, hurried voice, with her eyes riveted on the distant blue mountains.

"You know—do you?—I was brought up, educated in a convent, and all my happiest and best days were there. When I was growing up my only dread was to think of the day when I should have to leave it. At one time I used to tell my dear nuns I could never go. I could not leave them; I felt I was not strong enough to be able to be good and yet live in the world. I used to write

and beg my aunt to allow me to stay there, to take the veil. For two years I pleaded, and at last she wrote and said I must come back to Rome, that I was young, enthusiastic, and that I didn't know my own mind. So I went to Rome, and she plunged me into her life. Well, I am ashamed to say, I fell into it. She showed me the world in its brightest, gayest colours, and it absorbed and fascinated me, and the convent seemed like the dream of a life long ago, and all the time at Rome the better half of me was dead. Then one time, when we were travelling, we stayed a night at a little village near a convent. It was a beautiful, still summer night, and I was on the balcony in the evening, when suddenly I heard the nuns in the convent chanting vespers, just as I had heard them chanted all those years in my convent; and in a moment it all rushed back again, the longings, the peace, the good, and I knew that my heart was really there, only that the world had been too strong for my miserable, feeble

will. Ah! how I suffered! I implored—I entreated my aunt to let me go, to let me take the veil; but she was firm. You must see the world is everything to her; and when I would not yield, she then told me I should break my uncle's heart. He was ill and suffering; he had no children; I was his comfort; and by this she wrung a promise from me that I would wait till I was twenty-one, and then, if I was still determined, it should be as I wished. Oh, how I waited for the time! How long the days were! The Monsignor Camal, who had been my friend and confessor in Rome, told me all would be well, that I must be patient, and the time would go. I still had to go with my aunt everywhere, but it was all changed. I laughed and talked with the others, but I never forgot, never lost sight of my dear nuns. I used to fall asleep thinking I was chanting vespers with them. In my thoughts I was always there in the convent garden, in the chapel, helping to nurse the poor. Then my uncle

grew suddenly worse—he was dying—and he sent for me to his room. He beckoned me to him, and he asked me to stay with my aunt for three more years. He was dying, he said, and he could only die happy if I would consent to be with her. What could I do? I could not refuse—I gave him my promise. He died that night." Carmella's voice broke, and she paused.

"And then?" John touched her hand gently.

She recovered herself, and went on. "I have waited nearly three long years; and next May the time is over, and I am going —nothing will hold me back. Ah!"—and she turned suddenly towards John, and her face caught the same glow he had seen in it that night in the dining-room at Mardale—"you cannot understand what it is—the dream, the hope of my childhood to be realized. I am so nervous lest anything may come to prevent it, that sometimes I lie awake at night for hours thinking of it. My aunt,

she will do all she can to prevent it. We never speak of it now, but I know that she never forgets; but she can't prevent it, can she? It is a compact, is it not?"

She appealed to John in a broken, childish way, which almost unmanned him. The sun was shining as brilliantly as before, the landscape was ever deepening in beauty and colour, but he felt all was chilled and grey, and that his old friends, the mountains, were powerless to help him in this his great hour of need—they had no hope, no comfort.

"Tell me," she said, with an imploring gesture. "Why don't you speak? She cannot, can she?"

John brought himself back with an effort, but the wrong words came. He could not restrain them.

"It is impossible," he exclaimed wildly; "you cannot do it." He turned his passionate eyes, but she failed to see his meaning.

"You mean she can stop me?" she cried, with despairing accents. "She will ruin my

soul. I can only save it in this way, and no one can help me!"

"No, no, I don't mean that," said John, recovering his self-control. "I suppose"—his words came with great difficulty, and his voice sounded stiff and cold—"I don't see how any one can prevent you if you are determined; but it is horrible. I cannot believe it; you could not go away into the darkness of a convent. Think for a moment; you were almost a child when you left it, you had never known anything else. You probably think you liked it much better than you really did. One's associations cling to one, when one is away from them especially; and when one goes back to them, one wonders at having cared so much, and everything is a bitter disappointment."

She turned her wonderful eyes on him—sad and despairing eyes.

"You, too—you will give no help. You are all alike—the world, the world. Don't you see I want to go? I want to leave it. It is

only in those four walls and that peaceful garden I can find rest and happiness. But you are like the others; it is always the world —nothing else."

A sort of calm came across John; perhaps the very fact of her agitation calmed him.

"You mistake me," he answered very gently and rather huskily; "it is not the world, it is—there are many others suited to that convent life, but not you."

"It is just me," she answered. "You are strong enough to battle with the world—to stand against it, but I—I cannot."

"But"—John spoke in hesitating tones—"have you never considered, have you never thought of some one strong to keep you, to guide you?"—he threw back his head—"of marriage?"

"Yes," she answered simply; "one or two have wanted it, but I have always had the same answer. I have no love to give any one."

In the distance John saw Hilda coming

towards them with her light, reckless step. There were only a few moments left to them.

"But," he argued, "no one can ever be sure. You might care some day, and then——"

She, too, saw Hilda. She rose, and looked at him. Her eyes fell, and her face grew very white.

"I don't think," she said slowly, "it would ever be possible;" and she walked slowly towards Hilda, John following.

"I am afraid I have kept you a long time," began Hilda. "You look as if you had seen a ghost, Carmella; or are you cold?"

Then, as she caught sight of John, she cursed her thoughtless speech, and plunged into an account of her visit. The woman was very ill. She had had to make her bed, and give her tea; the baby had screamed all the time, and she had nearly shaken it. Then suddenly she broke off, and stood once more on the edge of the cliff, took off her hat, and let the sun and wind play with her auburn hair.

"Say good-bye to the view, Carmella. We shall lose it in a moment, and I want you to think of it when you go back to Italy as you see it to-day; and then you can never say England is not beautiful or the climate not perfect."

She stooped as she spoke, leant a little over the cliff, and gathered a spray of mountain-ash and handed it to Carmella.

"Take it and wear it," she said gaily, "and don't forget this day, nor us."

She turned and led the way, singing down through the larch wood, her clear young voice breaking the silence, and causing the pigeons to leave the trees and fly away.

The other two followed her silently. Their hearts were too full, and they were grateful to her for breaking the tension and diverting their thoughts from themselves. All the way back she sang little snatches of song. She was in a mood not uncommon to her—a mood of restless gaiety, when she could only see the brightness and the sunshine of life.

She resented being brought face to face with the sorrow or trouble of the world, and felt it all should not exist—did not exist. She was in her way rejoicing, and all must rejoice with her. She insisted on ignoring anything but joy, and others with her must do alike. This sick woman—she had forced her trouble upon her—John's face—she resented both in her present frame of mind; the intoxication of youth and life was upon her, and the warm sunshine all added to her intense vitality. To-morrow she would fall into harness again; but to-day, light—joy. She had set her face towards what she chose to think happiness, and on she sang with a happy ignorance of yesterday's troubles or to-morrow's uncertainties. John marvelled at her. Was this the girl who had sat over the fire that night with her soul in her eyes? And now, her ringing laugh and gay snatches of song made him feel as if he was an old man watching a child's revels.

Suddenly, as she unlatched the garden gate,

she paused—held up her hand, and turned her laughing, living face towards them.

"I am sure all Mardale is sitting in Burton. I feel it in my bones. The parlour-maid will be out, the big teapot will be locked up, and there will be Sunday buns cooked on Friday."

She made a mock gesture of despair, and went on, passed through the courtyard, turned once more with the same despairing gesture, as she pointed towards umbrellas leaning against the wall, but walked upstairs, and appeared suddenly to the many inmates gathered there.

Mardale was there, indeed—Mary and Ralph, Colonel Laurence, Maud Garvagh, and Sir John and Lady Georgina Adye, Mary's only sister, who had arrived at Mardale the evening before. Hilda's quick eye had run over them all in a moment as she threw off her hat, and expressed a hope that they had found something to eat and drink. Lady Georgina Adye answered for them all. She was a clever, vivacious woman, and always

declared she had come into the world to talk. She asked John innumerable questions without extracting much from him in reply. She told Lady Catherine her room was much too old-fashioned, and wanted doing up, and she patronized Hilda, much to the latter's amusement. Then she rose suddenly, and swept them all off, Ralph alone expostulating, and insisting upon remaining behind. As soon as they were outside, she drew her arm through Mary's, and said in low tones—

"Who is that foreign girl who went upstairs, whom no one introduced me to?"

Mary told her.

"And I suppose John is falling in love with her? How ridiculous of Aunt Catherine to allow it!"

"I don't see why you should think of such a possibility." Mary's manner was very stiff.

"I don't know; it generally happens. Oh, John, you are surely not thinking of going back! Do come a little further with us. It

is such a lovely evening, and I have so much I want to talk to you about."

John felt he was in for it, closed the garden gate behind them, and joined his cousin.

Meanwhile, Hilda and Ralph were left alone in the dining-hall at Burton, the Duchessa having followed Carmella upstairs, and Lady Catherine having gone to rest in the sitting-room. Hilda busied herself for a few moments, put the scattered teacups back on the table, and pushed the chairs into their places, Ralph watching her idly from a large armchair.

"Don't be so restless," he said at last. "You have quite sufficiently removed all traces of Georgina. Sit down and talk to me."

Hilda paused, a cushion she had just picked up from the floor in her arms, and looked at him.

"She is not the least like any of you," she exclaimed impatiently. "Why is she like that, Ralph?"

"She's a freak," he answered sententiously

his eyes fixed on his cigarette as he blew the smoke into rings.

Hilda laughed. "A very fashionable freak, then. She is horribly well dressed, so very smart, that when she comes into the room I always feel as if all my clothes had left me, and I have nothing on. At other times I fancy myself well dressed, but I dare say that is a delusion too."

"I shouldn't bother," said Ralph, lazily. "She used to upset me, and make me feel I looked like a top-hat brushed the wrong way; but I am used to her now. She is bored to death at Mardale, and is only there because it isn't fashionable to be in London at this time of year. I wish we'd kept Vivian to amuse her."

Hilda's lip curled. "I should have thought it preferable for her to have remained bored than to have been reduced to keep Colonel Vivian to amuse her. He would have been a heavy price for her entertainment."

Ralph was much diverted. "You hate that

man because he was criminal enough to want to marry you. Even now I don't know why you didn't. I suppose you have still your ideals, and are searching the world for the man who is to fulfil them."

Hilda shook her head. "No; I have outlived all ideals and illusions, and I think I look upon them as delusions. I am sure affection is the real, the only thing worth having. I have watched my friends who have married with an absurd idea that they had found all they wanted, and I have not seen much success. Women expect so much, and it seems to me there can be so little in a long life unless there is real affection—a sort of friendship affection which will always go on lasting and increasing. Don't laugh, Ralph; it's quite true, I assure you."

"I'm not laughing. But it's all rather cheap cynicism, isn't it, Hilda, at your age?"

"I don't think so. I have studied it for some years now—and, after all, at twenty-four one isn't a baby—and it seems to me that

everywhere I go I see people who are breaking their hearts and wrecking themselves over an imagination which they call love. They are all looking for something they'll never find, which doesn't exist really except in books and poetry; but if you do tell them, they don't believe. Nobody ever does believe; and I've come to the conclusion it's no good telling any one anything."

"No; advice is certainly not much good," remarked Ralph. "Nobody ever takes advantage of anybody else's experiences, and no one takes advice worse than you, Hilda."

She rose suddenly, and closed the window with a sharp snap.

"No, I suppose that's true," she admitted. "I always think it is the first sign of old age coming on when people have had enough experiences and begin to take advice."

"Don't be gloomy, Hilda. You looked radiant when you first came into the room. What has suddenly reduced you to this frame of mind?"

"All of you," she answered promptly. "Everything has tried to subdue me this afternoon—first the sick woman, then——" She remembered suddenly, and pulled herself up.

"Then—what?"

"I don't know. Everything seemed to hem me in and sadden me. I meant to be so happy to-day, and I loved the dear world; and now—well, now"—she made a poor attempt to laugh—"I am almost reduced to tears."

"Are you mourning your lost ideals?" he asked her. "Come, Hilda, if you think only affection worth having, why not do as I have often suggested to you. Marry me." He watched her furtively from his half-closed eyelids. "You have often told me you like me, and therefore why not?"

"No"—she put her hand on his arm as she spoke—"no, dear old Ralph; I like you as you are, but I should hate you in a week if I married you; and it's against all my cherished theories and principles that first cousins

should marry. I've told you all this before" —she dropped her hand—"but you never believe it."

"You're wrong, Hilda; quite wrong. Halloo, John! Back already? You didn't go far."

John advanced, and stood by the fireplace. "No," he said absently. "Where's mother, Hilda? I don't seem to have seen her all day."

"She's in her sitting-room."

John passed on, leaving them alone.

Ralph got up. "Well, I must be going. Good-bye, Hilda, and if ever you come to a better frame of mind, remember I am always the same."

Hilda threw back her head. "Take care," she said, "or I may some day take you at your word, and then *que faire?*"

"Ah!" exclaimed Ralph, as he took his hat and stick, preparatory to a start, "you won't take it seriously as I mean it; but even if it never comes to pass, we are friends always—eh, Hilda?"

She nodded. He called his terrier, ran downstairs, went through the courtyard, and out by the garden gate. Hilda watched him turn the corner; then she moved slowly away from the window, and going to the piano, played softly to herself.

VII.

CARMELLA had gone upstairs almost immediately after coming in, and, throwing off her hat and coat, had sat down to think over the events of the afternoon. "I don't know what I can do," she said helplessly, as she leant her head against the wall, the dark red roses of the wall-paper forming a striking contrast to her golden-brown hair, and gave herself up to thought. John's words, his look as she had risen to go to meet Hilda, could only have meant one thing, and she woke to the full realization of what had taken place; and with a flash, too, she knew that it had not left her untouched; it would be harder for her than it had been before. Temptation was strong upon her. John's words came back and back to her, "You

probably think you were much happier than you were." She could not get rid of them. They forced themselves on her. A perfect tumult was in her brain, and she lost all sense of proportion. She did not know even if she loved him; she only felt it had never been so hard before when she had had to say "No." This young Englishman was so strong, so resolute, also he made her feel the depth and power of his love, and she could not shake it off. She was almost frightened. Then suddenly she turned her head, and she saw the figure of the Madonna standing on the little table by her bed. She rose from her chair, and threw herself on her knees in front of it, but it was some moments before words came to her.

"Oh, Mother of God!" she cried at last, "intercede that I may have strength and grace to resist."

She knelt there for some minutes, the tears running down her cheeks; then she rose quite calm, with fresh strength. She had formed

a sudden resolve, and she left the room. She knocked timidly at the door of her aunt's room, and a voice said—

"Come in."

She advanced, and found the Duchessa on a sofa in her dressing-gown, reading a novel.

"Well, my child, how goes it with you?" she asked, as she closed the book.

Carmella did not answer for a moment; then she spoke quickly, and in a low voice.

"Aunt Theresa, I think we had better leave here to-morrow or Tuesday."

The Duchessa raised herself on her arm, and, turning round, tried to look at Carmella; but her niece was looking out of the window, and her back was turned to her.

"My dear child, why? What a ridiculous idea! We have only just arrived, and I want to stay till the end of the week."

Carmella turned round suddenly. "Aunt Theresa, I really want to go. I shall have to go, even if you stay."

The Duchessa's quick mind grasped it in a moment.

"Is it John?" she asked, somewhat hesitatingly.

Carmella nodded. She came nearer, and sat down close to her aunt.

"You see," she said, her eyes on her face, "I must go; it is not like the others. I think I am afraid; he would care so much. It frightens me."

The Duchessa made a venture. "And you?" she said, ignoring former years and struggles. "Could you not care, too? He is English—you love the English—and he is charming."

Carmella held up her head. "You know," she said, "it is impossible. I am pledged, vowed; and even if I were not, I would never consent to marry one who is not of my Church."

The Duchessa ignored the first part of the sentence, and eagerly caught at the last.

"I should have thought," she said, with

a slightly sarcastic inflection in her voice, "that your Church would hardly have countenanced or encouraged you neglecting such an opportunity. He would probably gladly embrace your religion for your sake."

"My Church would not accept him under those conditions," answered Carmella, proudly. "But let us settle this other question. You will come away, will you not?"

The Duchessa rapidly reviewed the situation. Before her lay the never-to-be-forgotten thought, the dread of the coming May, for which time she was saving up all her weapons of defence and entreaty. The idea of Carmella leaving her, of her shutting herself up for life, oppressed and weighed upon her so heavily that at times she felt she could hardly bear it. She must let her go now. She could not afford to waste her strength; and—well, if John cared as much as that, their going away would not make much difference. So she surrendered.

"Well, if it must be so, I suppose it must. I must tell Catherine to-night."

Carmella took her hand. "Do you mind dreadfully? I am so sorry!"

"No, I don't mind, only I don't know where we are going. I suppose I must telegraph to London for rooms. I shall not regret leaving here much. Catherine is so changed and so stiff; and oh, how cold it is! Do, Carmella, put a match to that fire. I suppose the Italian climate has spoilt me, but I have shivered all day since I came here."

Carmella knelt on the rug, and lit the wood fire, which was ready laid, and it blazed up suddenly.

"That is more cheerful. But go now, Carmella. We shall be late for dinner, and Catherine would consider that a heinous sin."

Carmella opened the door, and went back to her room. She had won, but she did not feel satisfied with her victory. As she passed along the corridor, she paused, and stood leaning against the wall, as she heard Hilda

playing the same love-song of Greig's which she had heard that night at Mardale, and a sudden human pain, a human longing, came over her; but she went on resolutely to her room, without allowing herself to think; dressed in her white satin frock, and went downstairs. Her face was very pale, and her eyes were shining like stars. Hilda even could hardly restrain from an exclamation at her beauty and grace. John never took his eyes from her face, but Lady Catherine seemed quite unconscious. The Duchessa felt she dared not broach the subject of their departure, and went on deferring the evil moment, and was grateful to Hilda, who, having recovered her spirits, was in her wildest mood. She took off Lady Georgina with wonderful mimicry, so that even Lady Catherine could not help laughing. She pictured her despair when she came into what she imagined would be a quiet tea, and found them all in possession, and then she went back to the morning, and described the breakdown in

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the anthem, and the vain grimaces and endeavours of Mr. Maddock to start them all again.

The Duchessa was immensely entertained. Lady Catherine interposed; she knew Hilda's moods, and this was a dangerous one.

"Dear Hilda, I don't like your making fun of the choir boys and Mr. Maddock; you really shouldn't do it."

"Well," Hilda admitted, "there is nothing I may not say or do to-night, so perhaps I had better stop. We mustn't laugh any more. It's Sunday. Let's think of something dull. Come, John, give us a subject. Tell us what you do on Sundays in Australia."

"Well, we go out a bit sometimes, and we hope the sheep will know it's Sunday, and look after themselves; and if we happen to have a new novel, we each take a turn at it, with our feet on another chair and a pipe in our mouths."

"There, mother!" exclaimed Hilda, in triumph, "what do you say to that?

Heathens aren't in it with you, John. It's quite shocking never to go to church."

"Once," said John, suddenly, "when I had been out there two years, there was a bad accident. We were riding after young horses, a lot of us together, and one horse put his foot in a hole, and fell over, and crushed the man who was riding him. We saw he was dying, and a chap who lived on the next station to ours, and who was the wildest of any one then, came up, and knelt down by the poor fellow's side and said some prayers. It was the most wonderful thing I ever heard, and I can never forget it; but you could not have picked out any one more unlikely. He never went inside a church, so you see that goes for nothing."

Hilda was sobered in a moment, and two large tears stood in Carmella's eyes, as she looked at John with ready sympathy.

Lady Catherine was not fond of emotions; she never allowed herself to give in to them. She rose abruptly, and they all left the

dinner-table. Hilda touched his arm; her eyes sparkled.

"I like that story, John; it's so *human*, but it's very grieving."

Then she, too, went on across the dining-hall, and left him to his wine.

The evening dragged a little. John was evidently in low spirits, and it did not help matters when the Duchessa, with a hesitating intonation in her voice, announced her decision of leaving on Tuesday. She chose the moment when Hilda was playing on the pianoforte, and there was a chance of only Lady Catherine hearing. That lady made a faint protest, and invited her to reconsider, and to stay on, if possible; but it was only a half-hearted invitation, and made it easier for her to refuse. As soon as there was an opportunity of a move, John crossed over, and sat down by the Duchessa.

"Why are you going away?" he asked abruptly, under the cover of the music, his question being only heard by her.

She hesitated for a moment; then she saw by his face that he knew, and that excuses would be useless, so she waited for him to speak again.

"Am I the cause?" he pursued.

The Duchessa bowed.

"She need not have been afraid," he said a little bitterly. "I should not have said anything to her again now."

The Duchessa felt Carmella might have exaggerated matters in her sudden fear. She must find out exactly how they stood.

"You do not mean to give her up in spite of all you know?"

John's face wore its most resolute expression. "I shall never give her up till I see the convent gates closed behind her. These next few months are mine, and you, if you will, can help me."

"And have you counted the cost?" she asked. "Carmella is very determined. She has set her heart upon this step, and if she persists, what of you then?"

"I take the risk," answered John, steadily.

"It may be, it probably is, a forlorn hope, but even if the worst happens, I cannot help doing all I can now. Besides, as I said, I will never despair till she has gone."

The Duchessa rose; he followed her example.

"Ah," she said, and she put her hand on his shoulder, "you don't know what you will suffer. Carmella is one in a thousand. If you care for her enough to pursue this in the face of her determination, you will never care again for another woman. And then, too"—a fresh thought struck her—"the religion. Are you prepared to change yours? She will never marry any one who is not of her Church."

"That, too," said John, "I have considered. I suppose I have never thought much of these things. I accepted my mother's religion as a child accepts what it is taught, and I have always till now drifted on without caring or thinking much. To-day in her Church I had a revelation. I saw what religion might be, and for the first time in my life I wanted it."

There was a moment's silence. From the hall Hilda's clear soprano voice came to them

in the hymn, "Lead, kindly Light." The Duchessa looked at John with a smile, but her eyes were full of tears.

"It is almost prophetic," she said softly.

Then she joined Lady Catherine and Carmella, who had gone into the hall at the first sounds of Hilda's music.

John lingered behind. He did not feel he could talk any more. The day, the emotions, had overpowered him, and he wanted rest. His mother came back into the sitting-room, and putting her hand on his head, gently passed it up and down. To her astonishment, he suddenly seized it and kissed it. "Poor mother!" he muttered, almost to himself; but Lady Catherine could not catch the words. She was followed by the others, and good nights were said. John, as he handed Carmella her candle, gave her a look which sent the colour racing over her cheeks, and watching her up the winding staircase till the last bit of her white dress vanished, he shut the door, and gave himself up to his pipe and thought.

VIII.

MONDAY was hopelessly wet. Hilda, coming down early to breakfast, found only Lady Catherine. A letter was lying on the table for her. She opened it laconically, but as she read, her expression changed to one of surprise and amusement. It ran as follows :—

"NICE HILDA,

"May I come and stay with you next Tuesday? Jim told me to come here for three weeks, but I can't bear more than ten days. I am on an island which is all rocks, and no trees, and the horrible sea is everywhere. I have to keep my fingers in my ears all night, because I can't bear the moaning; it makes me feel sad, and reminds me of all the

bad things I have done in my life. Aunt Elspeth asks me every morning why I don't go to China, and every morning I tell her I am too frightened to go by sea; and then she always says, 'Young women ought to be with their husbands.' So they ought, perhaps, but I should die of fright; and it would be no use my arriving there dead, would it, Hilda? I dare say you will never get this letter, because the boats only go twice a week when it's calm, and when it's rough they don't go at all. There was a kitchen-maid here who was sent away because she wouldn't come to prayers, and she sat on the pier waiting for the boat for three days, and she didn't dare come back. In the end she caught rheumatic fever and died. Yet they call themselves Christians here, and they have prayers three times a day. One of the elders asked me if my soul was saved, and I promptly told him if his was then mine must be, because I was much better than him. We eat porridge and Scotch broth all day. I shall leave on Monday morning if

the boat goes; if not, I shall go mad on the pier.

"Yours very much,

"JUDITH.

"Don't put me off, Hilda; but, of course, if you must, then telegraph to me to 'Central Hotel, Glasgow'; but please try and let me come. I shall leave Glasgow at ten on Tuesday."

Hilda took up the envelope and looked at the postmark. The letter was six days old; evidently the boat had not started. Then suddenly she realized that Judith's Tuesday meant to-morrow. She read the letter through once more, and, putting it down, laughed out loud. Lady Catherine looked up from her letters.

"What is it, Hilda?"

Hilda plunged into her subject at once. "Mother, you remember hearing me talk about Judith, my great friend who married a Captain Travers in the Navy. She is in

Scotland—the letter has taken some time getting here—and she would like to come and stay with us to-morrow."

"A little sudden, is it not?" asked her mother.

"Yes; but it's not her fault," answered Hilda, quickly. "The boats don't go every day. I suppose you don't object to her coming?"

"Oh no," said Lady Catherine, not too graciously. "She can come, certainly; only I like longer notice."

Hilda was wise, and, having gained her point, said no more; and the Duchessa's entrance created a diversion.

The rain continued to come down in sheets, the wind blew and rattled the old windows, and all hopes of the expedition Hilda had been planning had to be abandoned. She, however, provided Carmella with thick boots and a mackintosh, and they sallied forth for a walk. Carmella enjoyed it immensely. The rain and the wind in her face was so novel, and Hilda

was much amused by her enjoyment of such a very common, and to her disagreeable, occurrence.

Tuesday was a little better, though still damp. John declared his intention of seeing them off from Wyburn station, and rode his bicycle in behind the heavily laden fly. As soon as they were gone, Hilda called her dog and set off for Mardale. She wanted to see Mary, and here was a chance of a quiet morning. She walked in without ceremony, and not finding her in the hall, went through into the library, where she found her busy at accounts, papers of all kinds strewed before her. She rose as she saw Hilda, and advanced with a hearty welcome.

"How nice of you, Hil! I have so wanted to see you, and there never seems a chance."

Ralph's little boy, who was busy building bricks on the floor, rose too from his game with an exclamation of delight.

"Oh, Hilda, how splendid! Now we can

play hide-and-seek all over the house; only Nana says we mustn't play the bouncing-out game, as it makes her 'eart beat!"

He approached Hilda, and tried to lead her off.

"Oh, Jack, not at this hour of the morning! I really don't think I could." Then, noting his disappointment, "You see, the passages are all light; it would be no fun now. But I will come one day this week, I promise, with a friend of mine, who will play too; so you run now, Jack, and tell Nana we won't play."

The little boy went off, and there was a few minutes' silence between the two cousins, while Mary absently began to put the bricks back into their box.

"Are you all alone now?" she asked at last.

"Yes," said Hilda, her eyes wandering round the oak-panelled room, severe in its simplicity—books everywhere, and oak where there were no books. Only one picture was

let into the panelling, just over the chimney-piece—a beautiful Romney portrait of two girls, bygone Lord Empill's daughters, arms entwined, and laughter in their fair English faces. Then her eyes wandered on from it on to rows of little baskets on one of the tables. "Are you going slumming in Wyburn, Mary?"

Mary nodded. "There are so many sick people belonging to the factories. I have got one or two out here for change of air now."

"I wonder why you do it?" said Hilda, slowly. "I should so hate it."

"No, you wouldn't. You couldn't help being interested if you once began," answered Mary. "It is so wonderful to be able to give even one person happiness. Don't think me mad, but the other day when one girl, a hopeless cripple, told me that the day she spent here was the happiest day of her life, I very nearly burst into tears, and I almost threw my arms round her neck out of sheer gratitude."

"I wonder," said Hilda, inconsequently, as she gazed at the picture which looked almost lifelike sometimes, "if they found life as difficult in those days as we do now? They are always laughing in pictures, but I dare say they had worries too, and pictures were only their best moments."

Mary sighed. "I think," she said, and Hilda saw her hand tremble as she took up the last brick and placed it carefully in the box—"I think we expect too much happiness; it is so much better to realize there never may be any for one's self."

"Don't say that!" exclaimed Hilda, passionately, as she came nearer. "I can't bear it, Mary; I can't bear you to feel that. Everybody must have some happiness, and you will, too, some day."

Mary shook her head, and her eyes fell on the old tapestry screen in front of the fire, with its curious inscription, "Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas." So often the words were true to her, and she felt it was a wise

person who had worked them in bygone times.

Hilda crossed over to the window, and threw it open, exclaiming that it was hot. She hoped Mary didn't mind. Then, without turning her face, she said suddenly—

"Didn't you ask if we were alone? Yes; every one went this morning, and John went to the station to see them off. Mary, I didn't mean to like that Italian girl, but she fascinates me *malgré moi.*"

"And John too," said Mary, steadily—"he cares for her, Hilda?"

Hilda turned from the window with a sharp movement.

"Oh yes, Mary; he is infatuated, and mother don't, or won't, see it, and what will be the end of it I can't think. I don't know why I know, except that these things come by intuition, but I feel convinced that she will never marry him."

"Why?" Mary looked at her eagerly.

"That's just it. I don't know why, but I

feel it." Then suddenly, "Mary, why did Uncle Empill ask the Duchessa here for Christmas? Carmella told me this morning he had done so."

"You know what father is," answered Mary. "He is so hospitable, and the Duchessa was telling him she meant to stay in England for Christmas, to show Carmella what an English Christmas was, and he at once asked her to come here, and told her she would see several old customs which hardly any one observed now."

"It's a pity," said Hilda, thoughtfully, "but I suppose the deed is done; but Christmas is a long way off now, and it won't affect us, as we are promised to Aunt Maud, father's sister, and John will come with us. Good-bye for the present, Mary. You don't mind if I play the organ a little? And I will stay to luncheon if I may, as I must bicycle in from here to meet Judith Travers at Wyburn."

She went out of the door, closing it behind her. Mary stood for some moments so still

that she might have been a statue. Her face was very pale, and her hands were tightly clenched.

"If she breaks his heart," she said at last, out loud—"if she breaks his heart, I will never forgive her;" and slowly she went back to her letters. But all her energy had left her, and she sat with her pen in her hand, her eyes gazing into the outer world, and thinking only of his happiness. Only during the last ten days had it come to her how she had lived on the hope of John's home-coming; hope given to her by a few words—words which he might never have meant, words forgotten as soon as they were spoken. As yesterday she remembered it all—a picture which seemed now a long way off, those few moments on the deck of the ship eight years ago, when he had kissed her, and with both his hands in hers had said, "Wish me good luck, Mary, and tell me that you will be glad to see me again." And she had done so with her heart in her eyes; and on that her love had lived all these

years—lived for nothing but to die hard now. Might such suffering, too, be in store for him in the future, if, as Hilda thought, Carmella would not marry him? She prayed he might never know this pain; in her extraordinary self-abandonment she prayed, forgetting her own broken youth and wasted years, thinking only of his chances of happiness, and how she could best help him. She was roused by the gong and Lady Georgina's appearance. Mary recovered herself quickly, begged they would all go in to luncheon without her, and, with a resolute look on her face, gathered up her papers, put them into a large box by her side, locked it, and followed the others into luncheon. Every one was eating and talking as she went in, and the shadow on her face passed unnoticed. Lady Georgina sat with a pile of letters ready for the post by her side.

"You seem to have had a busy morning," remarked Ralph, as he passed her with Jack's plate.

"Constituents chiefly," she said airily.

"There were a lot of things to be answered to-day; and as father took George out shooting, I had to do them. Such a bore it is the way constituents expect one to come and speak in November, when they know quite well there is an autumn session, and George will be in London. It is hard enough to have an autumn session at all, without being bothered to go elsewhere."

"I thought you liked them?" retorted Ralph.

"Well," she admitted, "there are advantages, I grant you. It brings people to London, and they are a little glad to see you, and not always looking over your head with *yeux égarés*, wondering if it isn't time to be off somewhere else. I wish you'd go into Parliament, Ralph; you are so lazy."

"What does an ex-guardsman know of politics?" asked Ralph, good-humouredly. "No; we keep out of politics. We won't go into Parliament, will we, Jack?" pinching the little boy's ear.

"Certainly not," answered Jack, with prompt decision. "Nana says that's the place where they don't want the children to be vaccinated, and they won't give women any votes."

Every one laughed at this crude description, and Ralph told him he respected Nana's opinion, while Georgina threw up her hands and told him he was an *enfant terrible.*

Mary picked up the lost threads of the conversation.

"There's another advantage in London this November, Georgie. I see there is to be a set of Wagner concerts."

"Yes; I have taken tickets," answered Georgie, placidly.

Hilda sighed. "You talk of it as if it were eating beef or mutton."

"Not half so digestible," answered Ralph, who only caught the last half of the sentence. "I have been dragged by Mary to Wagner now and then, and I always come away the worse; and most of you like it because it's

so exciting and appeals to your emotions, but in your secret hearts you know you are none the better for it."

"That's absurd," said Hilda, quickly. "After all, nothing is better than emotions, if they are good ones, and no one can say that *Parsifal* can appeal to anything but one's best emotions: it is so very holy. But, then, Ralph, you can't understand because you have never been to Bayreuth, and it is only there that you can know what Wagner is, and what the music can be."

"I own I haven't been to Bayreuth," said Ralph, "but I have seen you all come back from it quite worn out, and Mary generally ill for a fortnight after. No; I maintain that it's unhealthy, and appeals to all that is worst in one. If you choose to blind yourself with sophistry, you will, I suppose; but I agree with a man I met coming out from *Tristram* the other day, who told me he felt as if he could commit any crime. Now, you may find Beethoven and Mozart dull, and

I know you call Mendelssohn watery"—here Hilda interrupted, but Ralph went on—"but, all the same, it is they, and men like them, who have done the world good with their music. But it's a craze, I know, and I suppose it will last as long as most crazes do."

"You're a regular Philistine, Ralph," answered Hilda, "and it's no good arguing. You don't understand, and you never will, and I haven't time now, even if I could convince you, for I must go to Wyburn."

She rose as she spoke. Ralph opened the door and carried her bicycle down the steps for her, and held it while she put on her gloves.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked her.

"No." She took the bicycle from him, and put her foot on the treadle preparatory to a start. "I never bear malice, and if you knew anything about it, you would know that Wagner only continued what Beethoven began."

"Then Heaven help the man who is going

to finish!" exclaimed Ralph, piously. "He ought to be strangled before he learns his notes."

Hilda laughed, waved her hand, and rode off. She rode a great pace for the first mile, and then, coming to a long hill, she dismounted, and joined an old farmer who lived near them, and who was evidently going the same way as she was.

"Good day, Gurnett. It is rather unusual to see you on the road, isn't it, at this time of day? How are you?"

"I's nobbut middling," the old man answered; "but I's had litter from ma sun, and he tells me I moust cum an' vote for t' candidate in Westmoreland. I's lift everything in't tirrible scroot, me dorter doon with t' influenza, an' I come reet ower from t' fields; but I'll git rigiler clean oop at ma sun's hoose."

"And who are you going to vote for?" asked Hilda.

"Weel, mi grandfeyther was blew, and mi

feyther was blew, an' A suppose I's blew, but A car lal about ether of 'em; but"—warming up—"I do think A'll vote fur wat's this, they call him 'Wooder,' cos they do say he's tirrible good hounter."

Hilda laughed, expressed a wish that his journey might not be in vain, and then, being at the top of the hill, she said good-bye, and got on to her bicycle. When she arrived at Wyburn the train was in the station, and she came suddenly upon Judith, who was holding her bicycle and trying to indicate which were her boxes to the bewildered porter. She turned as she saw Hilda, and a smile broke over her pretty, changeful features. She looked more like a happy child than a woman.

"Oh, Hilda, what a darling to come and meet me! I believe I have lost half my things. Hold the bicycle, and I'll dive into the van and look."

Hilda caught hold of the handles, and Judith lightly stepped into the van, and

emerged triumphant with a large wooden box and a hat-box.

"That's all right," she exclaimed. "Now, Hilda, where are they to be put?"

Hilda explained to the porter, and the two started on their bicycles. Judith gave exclamations of delight as they came into view of the lake mountain ranges tipped with snow. The afternoon had cleared up, and everything was very blue and clear. She continued to talk as long as her breath would allow, but after a mile she said she was tired, and must get off and rest. They propped their bicycles up against a gate; Hilda sat on a rail by the side, while Judith balanced herself on a half-open gate.

"I never saw such lovely country," she exclaimed, as she pulled out her cigarette case and lit a cigarette, "and such air! No wonder you are always well. I should never mope if I lived up here."

Hilda laughed. Judith edged nearer to her.

"Hilda, am I going to be terribly afraid

of your mother? I feel rather as if I was going to be frightened."

"I don't know. She is alarming, certainly, to strangers, but it is only her manner; she is really very kind."

"That means," said Judith, with a resigned face, "that I am going to be frightened, and you are letting me down as gently as you can."

Hilda laughed again. "No, really I am not. Ah! here come Mary and Georgie"—as a victoria passed them, Mary waving her hand.

"I suppose they're going to Wyburn?" remarked Judith.

"Yes; but I wonder at Georgie going. Mary is going to see factory girls. Isn't it odd, Judith? The only thing she cares for is to give poor people a little happiness. If one person says she has had a happy day, Mary slaves on for years on the strength of it."

"What an odd craze!" said Judith, thoughtfully. "I have known it before, but it is

generally either with people who are very unhappy or have led a bad life, and offer good works as a sop to their remonstrating consciences; but I should think Lady Mary would not come under either of those headings. I shouldn't imagine Lady Georgie cared much about good works."

"No," said Hilda, energetically. "She lives for many other things. I hate *her* friends, Judith; but all the same, when I see them, I know I despise them, but can't help being interested in them. I look with contempt on the life she leads, and yet I know if she asks me to go and stay with her in London for the Wagner concerts, I shall accept without hesitating. Don't you think I am rather a poor creature?"

"Oh no, because I know what it is," answered Judith. "One hates it at moments—at least, one's best half does, but the worst half likes it; and I always encourage my worst half, because it's so much easier and pleasanter."

"Judith," exclaimed Hilda, "you are as

bad as ever. When I got your letter I really was shocked, though I laughed."

"You didn't mind, I hope, my coming so quick?" answered Judith. "I really couldn't stay there any longer. I shook off the dust from my feet when I left, and I wrote and told Jim I wouldn't go and see any more of his relations. He won't like getting that letter," she added.

"Judith, I believe, really, you are quite heartless!" ejaculated Hilda, in an angry tone of voice.

Judith swung herself gently backwards and forwards on the gate.

"My dear," she answered, "that's just what I've been telling you for years, but you wouldn't believe it."

Hilda was nonplussed by her prompt acquiescence, but still rather angry.

"Some day," she said, "you will want a heart; and then, if you only knew what you will suffer, perhaps already as you may have made others suffer."

"No," said Judith, calmly, "I shan't. After all, Hilda, when I married, I told Jim I didn't want to marry; but he said I had better, and he would rather I did, so I did. Is that heartless?"

Hilda shrugged her shoulders.

"I own," proceeded Judith, in a hard, defiant voice, "I did not cry when my baby died; but then I had only known it two days, and I was afraid to touch it. Is that heartless?"

Hilda did not answer.

"And then, last of all, I know you think I ought to be in China; but when I married Jim, I only said I would on the condition that I should not cross the sea. So it was a compact. It might have been heartless then," she added ungrammatically, "but not now, because it is always right to fulfil a compact. And, anyhow," she finished energetically, "if it is all heartless, as I dare say it is—well, then, it isn't my fault. You can't help being born without a heart; and I am much happier

than most people." She threw away her cigarette end and jumped off the gate.

Hilda couldn't help laughing, although she told her her argument was absolutely illogical and inconsistent, and then they proceeded on their bicycles. As they neared Burton, Hilda caught sight of Lady Catherine and John arm-in-arm, walking towards the house. Hilda called to them, and they turned back and came to meet them. Judith was alarmed by Lady Catherine's kind but stiff greeting, but could not help noting what a beautiful picture she made as she stood between the yew hedges, with the square-mullioned windowed house behind her.

"I hope," she said, as she accompanied Hilda upstairs, and they were once more alone—"I hope, Hilda, we are not going to be serious. Your mother is very alarming, and your brother looks grave. Shall I be able to laugh? I haven't laughed for ten days."

"You may do exactly as you like," answered

Hilda, laughing, "except smoke cigarettes when mother is there. That is the only thing which really shocks her horribly."

"I'll be careful," answered Judith; but she was secretly wondering if Lady Catherine was as alarming as she looked. "But anything," she added to herself, as Hilda closed the door and left her alone—"anything would be paradise after the ten days I spent on the rocks"—she laughed softly to herself—"even sitting in high-backed chairs and no cigarettes; for I am on the main land once more, and I can't hear the sea." Then she went down to tea, and behaved herself very demurely.

IX.

For three weeks Judith Travers stayed at Burton, and Hilda gave herself up to her and all that she brought in her train. Together they bicycled all over the surrounding country; they borrowed riding horses from Ralph, and galloped about the park with reckless disregard of their necks, and their activity was the astonishment of all who saw them. One evening they went down to Mardale, and played the promised game of hide-and-seek, which exceeded all Jack's expectations.

Ralph had come in from shooting whilst they were playing, and had told Hilda she was the greatest baby of them all.

"Let me be a baby, Ralph," she had pleaded, as she raised her rough head from the sofa, where Jack had been pelting her

with cushions; "it is very refreshing, and is so good for one."

He had laughed, and, having been persuaded to join the game, the riot became louder, and cries of "Cuckoo" and "Whowhoop" resounded through the half-darkened house. Lord Empill was much taken with Judith, and, not having anything to do with her, her charming inconsequence and spontaneity delighted him, and he insisted upon inviting her to his ever-increasing Christmas party, which invitation she accepted with great promptitude and alacrity.

About ten days after her arrival, she and Hilda were alone in the dining-hall at breakfast, when the post was brought in. Lady Catherine was having breakfast in bed, as she had a cold, and John had not yet come down. Hilda scanned the letters eagerly; but there were none for her. There was a large parcel of books for John which attracted her attention. In a moment she recognized the Duchessa's flowing handwriting, and her quick

brain, too, flew to the conclusion that they were books of instruction in Roman Catholicism. She remembered hearing words pass between the Duchessa and John as to Catholic books; but at the time she had thought she was mistaken, and that no one could really be capable of such treachery to her own religion.

She took the parcel up, and longed for a moment to throw it into the fire. But she knew it was impossible, so she contented herself with flinging it down again on the table, and, forgetting she was not alone and her temper getting the better of her, she exclaimed—

"How abominable of her! Nasty old cat! I did quite right to hate her. How dare she —how dare she!"

"My dear," said Judith, calmly, continuing her breakfast in spite of Hilda's outburst, "what *are* you talking about?"

Hilda suddenly remembered herself, and coming back to the table, resumed her seat, but there was an angry light still in her eyes.

"I can't tell you now," she said hastily, as she heard steps approaching; "some other time. Don't allude to it now, please."

Judith nodded. John opened the door and came in. Hilda, teapot in hand, furtively watched him, as he went to the side-table and took up his letters and parcel of books. He scanned them carelessly at first; then, as he looked at the label, she saw a sudden dawning interest in his face; but, after a moment, he put them down quietly, and returning to the breakfast-table, asked for some tea, and inquired of Judith what were their plans for the day. Judith didn't know; she thought Hilda wanted to practise on the organ; but she hated the organ, even more than the pianoforte. If Hilda persisted, she should not go with her.

"Do you hate all music?" asked John, smiling. This friend of Hilda's amused him considerably, with her childish ways and her utter disregard of duty and responsibility.

"Yes, all!" she exclaimed vehemently;

"at least, all real music. It grates and hurts me, and is a horrible jangle and discord!"

"Is there any music which is not real?" pursued John.

"Yes"—he started at her change of tone and the dreamy look in her face—"yes; sometimes at night, when I am going off to sleep, I hear beautiful music. I dare say it wouldn't be music to all of you, but it soothes and comforts me. I have never heard anything like it in real life-music. One year I haunted all the concerts in London to see if I could hear it, if it really existed, but I have never heard it yet; perhaps either it or I belong to some other world somewhere."

"Isn't she odd?" asked Hilda, appealing to John.

"When I was a child," Judith proceeded, "they made me learn my notes and scales, because I was weak enough to tell them I heard this music at night. So they said I must have undeveloped music in me; but"—with a light laugh—"they found they were

mistaken, and they soon gave up my musical education."

John laughed; they all got up. He went once more to the side-table, and took up his books. No sooner had the door closed upon him than Hilda's wrath broke out again.

"It is too bad! I can't get over it! I must tell you, Judith. I know you are safe, and I can't keep it to myself any longer."

And she told the tale from John's home-coming till now—of his sudden infatuation for Carmella; of the Duchessa's evident determination that Carmella should marry him; but of Carmella's purpose she did not know. That might perhaps have relieved her mind if she had known of it.

"But how," asked the somewhat bewildered Judith, when Hilda had finished pouring out her tale—"how do you know these books are Catholic, or that they come from the Duchessa at all?"

"I heard her say she would send him books which would instruct him, and I know her

writing." Here Hilda stamped her foot. "She pretends to belong to our Church. What right has she to try and proselytize? It is so mean, so wicked, to gain her own worldly ends!"

"How do you know," argued Judith, "that the girl did not send the books?"

"She couldn't," answered Hilda, impatiently. "She is Italian; she has never been in England before; she does not know any English books. I can't imagine," she went on in a calmer voice, "why she wants Carmella to marry John; he is nobody; he isn't even rich, and yet there is no doubt that she is anxious. I can't help feeling there is something behind it all."

"Well," said Judith, in a matter-of-fact voice, "if it is to be, it will be; it's no use your worrying, Hilda. And how about your theory that nothing matters?"

Hilda laughed in spite of herself, and gave Judith a little shake.

"It's quite true, nothing does matter; and,

as you say, I shan't help it by worrying. Let's go out, Judith, and finish taking up the violets."

John took the books into his own particular den, and undid the parcel. He looked at the titles with great interest, and for a few moments he sat down and read some pages of one of them. But time was pressing. He had to meet Ralph at a given point for a day's shooting, so he gathered them together, and, opening a large davenport, locked them up in it, and went out. He had been waiting for some time for these, and he was glad they had come at last. For some days after he shut himself up in his room between tea and dinner, and read eagerly. Hilda surprised him once; but he continued to read, nothing daunted, which astonished her. His mother, happily unconscious, sat reading and working day by day in the drawing-room, little thinking of the great danger which was threatening her, coming nearer and nearer. Every Sunday John found an excuse for going to Wyburn

to fetch the post. In this way he always arranged to be in time for Mass, and on the third Sunday he introduced himself to Father Stanhope, and asked him if he would allow him to come to see him.

Hilda, preternaturally sharp, saw it all passing before her eyes. She had been in to Wyburn one Sunday, but she felt she was powerless to prevent or even retard matters. John's resolute face, and evident determination, paralyzed her; also having been so long apart from him, words did not come naturally to her. Once or twice she made up her mind she would speak—the words were on her lips—and then her heart failed her; although afterwards she bitterly blamed herself for being a coward, and untrue to her faith, and made up her mind that to-morrow she would speak, come what might. But when the next day came, the difficulties were just as great, and so they all drifted on.

Towards the beginning of November, John began to get restless. Hilda recognized the

cause in the Duchessa's handwriting, with a London post-mark. Lady Catherine saw, too, that he was restless, without divining the cause. He talked vaguely of a fortnight in London, and only hesitated to settle the day owing to his mother's face of dismay at the idea of his leaving her again so soon. But his opportunity came in quite an unexpected way. Hilda one morning received the long-hoped-for invitation from Lady Georgina to stay with her, making her the tempting offer of two tickets for the Wagner concerts during the last fortnight in November. With this came a letter from Maud Garvagh, saying she had persuaded her mother to give a coming-of-age ball for her in London on the first of December, and Hilda and John must both come to it. Hilda jumped at the concerts, and grumbled at the ball, but sat down at once and accepted both. John said he would chaperon her to London, and look after her there. Lady Catherine was torn in two between parting with him and the uncomfortable

conviction that without him Hilda would be left to her own wild, independent ways for a fortnight, under the very vague and easy-going chaperonage of Lady Georgina, who she knew would be too much absorbed in her own doings to pay much attention to her guest; so she chose the former as the lesser of two evils, and encouraged him to go. Judith had started a week before for her flat in Victoria Street. Lady Catherine was persuaded by Lord Empill to spend the fortnight with him at Mardale; and towards the middle of November they started, Hilda full of excitement, in her wildest mood, and John even infected by her mirth; he, too, hoped again.

Just as the train was about to start from Wyburn, Hilda looked round, and caught sight of Ralph — Ralph hurrying, which was an almost unknown quality with him. He jumped into their carriage as the train moved off.

"Where are you going?" asked Hilda, much surprised by his sudden advent.

"To London," he answered, in his usual laconic way, as he threw a bag and rugs on to the racks. "Why so astonished? Do you imagine you have the entire monopoly of London and the railway?"

"You are not going to stay with Georgie, I suppose?"

"Not I," said Ralph, with more energy than he usually displayed. "Georgie's is a house where all the company talk in epigrams; and I can't stand that. They think it clever, too, and it is only damned affectation."

"What will become of me?" asked Hilda, throwing up her hands. "I shall be hopelessly out of it. I never think before I speak, and to produce a real epigram you must think a good deal before you say anything at all; or you must read a subject, and then lead the conversation to it so cleverly that no one discovers."

"I may perhaps look in for luncheon one day, and talk commonplaces to you," suggested Ralph, hopefully. "Hold your own

with them, Hilda. They all talk gibberish which no one understands but themselves. I call it deuced bad manners. Hullo! where are you going, John?" he asked, as he stepped out into the corridor.

"I saw a fellow I wanted to talk to," he answered. "He got into the next compartment at Wyburn. I shan't be gone long." He shut the door, leaving the cousins alone.

After some minutes Ralph crossed over and sat down opposite Hilda. She apparently did not notice it, and continued the book she was reading.

"Hilda"—he touched her book—"put that down and talk to me. I haven't had a word for weeks."

"I've got nothing to say," she answered, as she put away her book. "Living at Burton does not sharpen conversational powers, and we have been hopelessly dull since Judith went."

"What's the matter with John? He's grown very grave and absent lately."

"I don't know," she answered. "It's the old thing, I suppose, *Cherchez la femme.*"

"Hilda," he asked her, "have you ever thought again of me, and of what I asked you? You may not believe it, but I am so fond of you. Couldn't you try and like me a little? Enough to marry me? I know I could make you happy, if you would only believe it. Will you?"

Hilda shook her head. "It's impossible, Ralph. I am so sorry—if you really do want it—that I can't. I might say I would to-day; but if I did I know I should withdraw to-morrow, and that would be much worse than saying 'No' now."

He did not say any more; he saw it was useless. She took up her book, while he leant back in his corner, and watched the trees and fields, as the train raced on, carrying with it the three with their hopes, fears, and disappointments.

X.

On the same day the Brewsters were travelling to London, the Duchessa and Carmella were coming up in the evening from spending the day with some friends at Hampton Court. They arrived about seven o'clock in Eaton Square, where they were staying with one of the Duchessa's sisters; and Carmella, passing through the hall, picked up a note from the slab, and, opening it, gave a little cry of pleasure.

"Oh, Aunt Theresa, my dear Monsignor Carnal is in London! What pleasure! He is here, he says, to attend a Catholic conference, and he will come and see me, if I tell him what time I shall be in to-morrow morning."

The Duchessa was at that moment engaged in reading a note from John, telling her of his proposed journey to London, and of his

intention of calling in Eaton Square the following morning about half-past eleven. Fortune seemed certainly to be playing into her hands. She had wished, above all things, to see Monsignor Carnal; she had at one time almost made up her mind to write to him, and now, at the most opportune moment, here he was in London. He had, she knew, attained a considerable influence over Carmella, and if she could only persuade him to exert it in the right direction, all might be well. So she entered into Carmella's pleasure with great heartiness, and begged her to write at once and ask the Monsignor to come early—at eleven, if possible. Carmella threw off her hat, and sat down to write her note. The Duchessa sat down also and wrote another note, begging him to come half an hour earlier, if he could conveniently do so, as she had something of importance to tell him—for his ear only it was.

She sealed the note with precision, and asked Carmella for hers. She handed it to her

aunt, and left the room to dress for dinner. The Duchessa gave both notes to the servant, and begged that they might be sent at once.

Next morning favoured her also. Carmella suggested going to early Mass at the Oratory, and to breakfast afterwards with an Italian friend of hers in Pont Street.

"I shall be back by eleven," she added, "and if Monsignor is before me, please tell him I shall be home directly. Perhaps he will be late."

But the Monsignor was too busy a man to be unpunctual, and he was ringing the bell in Eaton Square at half-past ten. A few moments later he was shown into the drawing-room, where the Duchessa was awaiting him somewhat anxiously and nervously. She was curiously afraid of this gaunt, spare man. His large, clear eyes seemed to penetrate her through and through, and she never felt quite at her ease with him. He had been her husband's confessor formerly, and had possessed a wonderful influence over him. In

his younger days he had been looked upon as one of the coming prelates—even more; but at sixty he was still only Monsignor Carnal—a disappointed man, perhaps, but adored and believed in by all who had ever come in contact with him.

Time was precious. Carmella might return, and as soon as necessary greetings were exchanged, the Duchessa began at once.

"I hope," she observed, "it was not inconvenient to you to come so early. I wanted so much to see you about something which concerns my dear child."

The Monsignor bowed; he had supposed that her note alluded to Carmella. The Duchessa found it very difficult to continue. This man did not help her in any way either; he sat quite quietly, waiting for her to begin, and for once her usual volubility appeared to have deserted her.

At last, in desperation, she plunged into it. "Last summer," she said abruptly, "we went to stay in the north of England with an old

friend of mine, Lady Catherine Brewster. While we were there, her son arrived from Australia. He fell in love with Carmella—one might almost say at first sight—and she was strongly attracted by him. I don't know exactly what happened, but one night she came to me in great distress, and told me—well, I gathered he had asked her to marry him. This, of course, has happened before with others; many people, as you know, have wished to marry Carmella, but *she* has never cared before. She broke to him—this he told me—her determination to become a nun. She was much agitated, and insisted upon our leaving Burton at once; and that is as far as it has gone, except"—she touched a packet of letters by her side—"I heard from him last night. He is in London, and is coming here to-day. You will wonder, perhaps, why I have told you this rather commonplace story, which appears to have nothing unusual in it. I will explain. This man, John Brewster, is the son of Anglican—you might almost say

Presbyterian—parents. His father is dead, his mother has brought him up in strict evangelical principles, and I suppose he has drifted on, not caring much, or, perhaps, not attracted by the severity of his mother's creed. One Sunday he went with Carmella to her church, and seeing her there made a profound impression upon him. That, combined with coming into contact with her beautiful faith and pure soul, made him realize what religion might mean. He told me in the evening that, for the first time in his life, he had wanted it. Now"—the Duchessa hesitated; she did not like to put it too baldly—"I am quite sure that, with your influence, Carmella would perhaps be persuaded to contemplate giving up the convent and marry him; and, surely, the bringing of a soul into what you consider the religion of salvation, would be a thousand times more valuable than living the life of a nun?"

The Monsignor paused before answering, and then he spoke with great deliberation.

"My dear Duchessa, to begin with, you overrate my influence. I could not force, or even persuade, the child, even if I would; and besides, I could not be so responsible as to induce her to give up her life's project——" He did not finish.

Carmella opened the door, and came quickly towards him. He greeted her warmly, and blessed her. She gently took one of his large, bony hands, and kissed it. It was very pretty to see them together, this old man and young girl; but the Duchessa was annoyed at the conversation having been brought so abruptly to a close.

"Go, Carmella," she said, "and see if your aunt is in the library. If she is there, I will go upstairs, and let you and Monsignor have your talk here."

Carmella ran downstairs, leaving the door open. There was only a moment left to the Duchessa. She gathered herself together, and tried a last venture.

"Many years ago," she said slowly, "you

and my husband would have counted it a great gain at one time to have won my soul. According to your creed, it was for your salvation as well as mine; and yet now"—her voice had a slightly sarcastic intonation—"now both you and Carmella have the way open to you, the road clearly defined with this young man, and you seem to be able to afford to neglect and disregard it. I confess I do not understand it."

She saw by his face her shaft had gone home, but he could not answer. Carmella reappeared, said the library was empty, would Monsignor come, and the door closed behind them.

The Duchessa walked up and down the room, her hands clasped. Had she done any good? Would he influence Carmella the right way? Every day the horrible nightmare of the convent came nearer and nearer to her—the day which was to take Carmella from her; and she felt in John lay her only chance of escape. That Carmella had been strongly

attracted by him was a certainty. From things she had let fall, her aunt could see she still remembered, and thought of him. Oh, if all could be as she wished!

Meanwhile Monsignor and Carmella had gone downstairs, and she was talking as a child would to a father. He gently questioned her as to her life in England; but it was some time before he led her on to tell him of her days in the north, and John. She trembled a little, and the tears were in her eyes as she told him how she had been afraid of herself, and how she had gone away.

"And this young man," asked Monsignor Carnal—"what of him, my child? Does he wish to embrace our religion?"

"I think so, but I am not sure. He has been reading instructive books, and my aunt tells me he has been talking with the priest; but more I do not know."

"And you—what of you?" he said gently.

She did not answer for a moment, and then she looked at him through tears.

"Ah, my father, that is the worst part of it! He made me feel I should like him, and that through him I might be unfaithful to my purpose in life."

"And did you never think, perhaps, of another purpose in your life?" he said, still very gently. "Can you afford"—unconsciously he used the Duchessa's words—"can you afford to neglect this great opportunity and privilege God has given you of bringing a soul into the light?"

Carmella started. This was indeed a new revelation to her, and for the moment it dazzled and bewildered her.

"We all owe each other something in this life," he proceeded; "and though this responsibility of yours is an unconscious one, still it is a great responsibility, and you must look upon it as such. Far be it from me to persuade you one way or the other; your own conscience, your heart must tell you that. But, my child, pray—pray that you may be led in the right way, and let God,

and only God, be your guide in this great crisis in your life, and remember your purpose was only a purpose, and only made by yourself. You have taken no vows; you are as free to-day as you always were."

He did not say more, he thought it best to leave it, and asked her to take him upstairs to say good-bye to her aunt.

Carmella opened the door, led him upstairs, and they went back into the drawing-room.

There, to her astonishment, standing on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire, looking taller than ever in his London clothes, was John.

He advanced eagerly to meet Carmella, and shook hands with her. His brain reeled with joy; with all his longing to see her again, he had not realized what joy it was.

"Monsignor"—she took the old man's hand in hers, with a gesture which John thought was the prettiest and most touching thing he had seen—"this is my friend, Mr. Brewster, I told you of. Mr. Brewster"—she turned

towards John—" you have heard me speak of Monsignor Carnal."

The Monsignor shook hands cordially with John, expressed pleasure at meeting him, and somehow John felt he had a friend in him. Monsignor Carnal, after leave-takings with the Duchessa, departed, Carmella accompanying him to the door, and then returning. John was making arrangements for further meetings. Would they dine with him, and go to the play? He would go round and take tickets.

The Duchessa accepted. Carmella expressed herself pleased, and she and John remained talking for some time, while the Duchessa busied herself with answering letters. He lingered till the luncheon bell reminded him he was due at Lady Georgina's, and apologizing for what he called his visitation, took his leave, reminding them, as he went, that they were due to meet him at Prince's Restaurant that evening.

XI.

Lady Georgina Adye was quite content. She was giving a dinner-party. She had collected with little difficulty a promiscuous party, and it rather promised to savour of Jamracks. A poet, a bishop, an actor and his wife, a French painter, two Conservative peers with their wives, a young Swedish contralto, who expected to make her *début* in London during the summer, and a Radical member of Parliament with his wife. These, with Hilda and Ralph, formed the party. Hilda dressed with some perturbation, mindful of Ralph's warning words. She had been dreading the ordeal, and had begged Georgie to allow her to stay upstairs, or, if not, to let her go in to dinner by herself, and sit in an out-of-the-way corner of the table. But her

cousin had been obdurate. She even declared that the dinner-party had been got up expressly for Hilda's benefit; but Hilda's credulity did not extend as far as that.

She went down to the drawing-room, and found a good many assembled. She was introduced to several, but the names conveyed very little to her. It seemed to her long past the dinner hour, and she looked round, wondering who was missing, when she heard "Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose" announced. Ah! this lady, then, was the one Georgie had talked to her of as being so extraordinarily brilliant. She watched her enter the room. She seemed to engross the attention of all in it, as she greeted every one as she passed up the room to her hostess. She was full of apologies. She had been in the House of Commons till a quarter to eight; she had had such a scramble to get into her clothes—and indeed her hair testified to that; had Sir John heard the most interesting debate on the Church; and—— Here Sir John interposed,

introducing Ralph to her, as he carried off Lady Chantal to dinner. Mrs. Ambrose took Ralph's arm, and wondered who he was. Lord Verncourt conveyed nothing to her.

She unfolded her napkin with great care, looked round her, and then turned to Ralph.

"How awkward to be opposite that man! Do you know"—lowering her voice a little—"he proposed to me every season till I married, and sometimes twice."

"And," said Ralph, nothing daunted, "did you never, like the unjust judge, think of giving in to his importunities?"

"Certainly not," she answered; "he was too hopelessly middle-class for anything."

"What is your definition of middle-class?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said vaguely—"the sort of man who would wheel the perambulator in Regent's Park on Sunday afternoon in a shiny frock-coat, his wife walking beside him, or generally a little in front, in silk gloves. Is your wife here?" she added.

"I am a widower," answered Ralph, gravely.

She appeared slightly discomfited, but only for a moment.

"I oughtn't to have asked," she said. "I suppose I ought to be sorry?"

Ralph bowed, and for a few moments there was silence. Then she started afresh.

"What extraordinary people Lady Georgina does get together! That woman"—indicating a very pretty woman some way off—"ran away from her husband two years ago."

"Well, she has evidently returned to him now," remarked Ralph, "or they wouldn't be dining here together."

"Yes; but what a risky thing to do to ask them. Many people would have gone right away. What should you do," she said, turning suddenly round to him, "if your wife ran away with another man?"

Ralph paused for a moment, while he helped himself to an *entrée*.

"If I cared for her," he said quietly, with an involuntary look at Hilda, "I should kill him; if not, I should let her go, and thank

God she had shown herself in her true colours."

"But," she urged, "if he were your best friend, what then?"

"My best friend would be incapable of such an action."

"Oh, then," she said scornfully, "you are old-fashioned. You believe in honour, do you?"

Ralph answered that he was foolish perhaps, but he did believe that men had some sense of honour with regard to their friend's wife.

"My dear man," she said, turning towards him, and speaking with great decision, "honour only exists as long as it is convenient. When a man is in love with his friend's wife, honour goes to the winds, and he ignores it altogether."

"Don't you think," he asked, good-humouredly carrying the war into other quarters, "that it is rather a pity to destroy people's illusions, if they still retain any? It's hardly kind, is it?"

"Certainly not," she retorted. "If people are foolish enough to retain illusions, they deserve to have them torn to pieces." Then her eye wandered again, and she broke out on a fresh subject. "How can Lady Georgina wear a pink frock with that red hair?"

"Take care," said Ralph; "she is my sister."

"Oh, that's an absurd old joke," she answered. "Please don't think I believe that."

"But she is, really," urged Ralph. "Ask your next neighbour. I am really not joking."

"Well, I suppose I must believe you," she said; "and as I have said two things to-night which certainly come under the heading of 'things one would rather have left unsaid,' I think we had better discuss the weather and the crops. All the same," she added, with decision, "she ought not to wear pink with that hair."

After a moment she put her hands to her head.

"I am shockingly untidy," she said; "tell me truthfully, am I not?"

Ralph regarded her critically through his half-closed eyes, out of which no one gave him the credit of seeing anything.

"You are, rather," he admitted. "Your hair is rough, and your necklace is crooked."

She laughed. "You are charmingly frank, but I know I am. I was in the House of Commons when I ought to have been dressing, and dressing when I ought to have been here. My maid tossed my frock over my head while I was washing, and tried to tidy my hair as I went downstairs. My maids don't stay with me long. Like my children, they say I keep them living at too high tension."

"The maids can go; but what of the children? I should think they would develop disease of the brain."

"More people die from undeveloped brains than from too much development. Look at the idiots who spend all their lives killing something—even shoot rats when there is nothing else. Surely it is better to die of

too much development than that. I found my boy, aged eight, the other night, sitting up in his bed at nine o'clock with the electric light turned on, reading the 'Archbishop's Address on the Church Question.'"

"What a horrible prig!" rose to Ralph's lips; but he refrained from uttering it aloud.

She divined his intention, and turned upon him.

"You were going to say he is a prig; but not at all. He can ride and play cricket like any other boy; only his brain is developing as well as his body. And now," she said, in lower tones, "I'm going to talk to my other neighbour, who is eating cheese with his knife with extraordinary success. I am going to ask him how he does it. You asked me for middle-class definitions—that is one. I am sure, too, he 'takes' tea and coffee, and has a cosy on his teapot."

"I should be careful if I were you," answered Ralph; "he is not very far off, and he might be sensitive."

"You mean," she retorted, "that I am indiscreet."

Ralph hesitated. "Not quite that."

"Well, rash, anyway. Perhaps I am. I apologize."

"Please don't," he said. "But I don't think he looks quite the man who could play at questions and answers."

He turned as he spoke, and, seeing an opportunity, started a subject with his other neighbour, leaving Mrs. Ambrose with the uncomfortable conviction that he had got the better of her. She never could bear that; it was rare to her, and she could not become accustomed to it.

Soon after, Lady Georgina made a move, and the ladies left the room. Hilda had been getting on very well. She had had a very pleasant time, and was in the best of spirits. The evening was very short, Mr. Ambrose returning almost immediately to the House, accompanied by his irrepressible wife; and this somewhat broke up the evening,

and encouraged early departures. Ralph lingered a few moments after the others had gone, and rallied Georgie on the incongruity of her guests. It was a perfect menagerie, he told her. But Georgie was quite imperturbable; told him he did not understand London nor dinner-parties. She was perfectly satisfied, evidently. So he left, after reminding them that he had a large family dinner-party at Willis's Rooms the next day, and that he had taken a row of stalls for the Richter concert afterwards.

XII.

For nearly three weeks did all those with whom this story is concerned remain in London, each following their own bent, with some set purpose in view. Hilda, as Lady Georgina expressed it, drowned herself in music. She devoted all her mornings to music-lessons, and in the afternoons generally discovered there was some concert worth hearing; and again, several evenings there were the Richter and Wagner concerts. Ralph accompanied her as often as he could, ignoring his former antagonistic feelings, and only caring to be where she was.

The rest of her time was given up to Judith Travers, who insisted on spending a large portion of it in the shops, only now and then consenting to visit a picture gallery. She

saw very little of John. He came round to Brook Street some mornings to ask her if she wanted him; but generally her day was arranged, and he was free to devote himself to Carmella. He had gone to the Oratory for Benediction the Sunday after arriving in London, and, coming out, had met Monsignor Carnal, who had greeted him kindly. They had walked back together to Lord Empill's house in Grosvenor Street, where John was staying, and had had tea there. John had talked much to him on the subjects which were engrossing him—talked to him diffidently and with difficulty at first, with an Englishman's true horror of displaying his feelings; but the Monsignor had, with great tact and consideration, met him half way, and he had begged John to come to him and to let him explain anything he wished to know. So it came that after that they met often. He recommended John more books, and he helped him in the reading of them.

Carmella was a great source of joy to him.

The knowledge that she had unburdened her mind to her dear Monsignor had brought with it a sense of strength and composure, and unconsciously she opened out in a way which she could have hardly believed possible in former times. She told him of her life—so many little things seemed to interest him—and he listened eagerly to all which concerned her; while, for his part, he found in her a ready and sympathetic listener to all he had to tell her—of his Australian life; of his partner, who was his best friend; of their long, uphill struggle; of many, many things, and, greatest interest of all, his life during the last two months, his searching and groping for the faith. They met so often. It was his only object, and he gave himself up to it; but on the dearest subject of his heart—his love for her—he did not speak. He dared not risk anything by too premature a declaration, and although he felt that time was flying and that their days together were numbered, still he waited; he was so much

afraid lest she should take alarm and escape from him again.

One night at a concert at St. James's Hall, just as Richter had finished conducting Tschaïkowsky's "Symphonie Pathétique," and the whole audience were thrilled, some even moved to tears, she turned to John. It seemed to him as if her eyes had suddenly grown more human, and she said in her low, clear tones—

"Ah! the beauty of that. It makes one believe in the power of human love."

But he could not answer; the sudden hush fell again, and the music started afresh. But somehow it gave him more hope, more confidence than he had had before. But still he waited; opportunities of an unbroken conversation were so few, and could never be counted upon.

The Duchessa, meanwhile, was more satisfied. She felt that Carmella must be considering matters, and she divined rightly that her words had gone home to Monsignor

Carnal; and as the days went by, she felt a glimmer of hope. But her heart was heavy when she saw letters lying to be posted directed to one of the nuns at the Santa Maria degli Angeli Convent, and she felt that, until all connection should be severed with them, the danger was still a very real and present one. She knew, through Carmella, that John had seen and talked with Monsignor Carnal; and she knew, too, that Carmella and John had had conversations in which they had discussed religious matters, and she had explained different forms of worship and usages to him. On Lady Catherine the Duchessa dwelt little. The thought of her despair and grief—should what she now foresaw to be likely come to pass—she heeded not. If, on rare occasions, her conscience was inconvenient on this point, she resolutely dismissed it. She had no scruples. It was his mother's bigotry and narrow-mindedness, she told herself in defence, which had alienated John from the religion of his childhood, and had thrown him

into the arms of others; and she never realized that in so aiding and abetting she was doing her a great wrong. But her whole mind was centred in Carmella marrying John, and it mattered little to her as to who was sacrificed in the accomplishment of her object; in fact, she would have never hesitated to sacrifice any one or anything which came between her and this much-wished-for goal.

Hilda, too, at this time was not feeling very comfortable. On the few mornings she had asked John to take her out, he had, although quite nice about it, shown her that he was wishing himself elsewhere, and had hurried away on the first opportunity.

She guessed rightly that he was constantly in Eaton Square, and the few times she had been there she had certainly always found him installed. She had also, one day driving, passed him walking in deep conversation with a Catholic priest; and although she had no conception of how imminent the danger was, still it worried her, and made her feel she

ought to do something. But what? Ah! that was the difficulty. She had always been strongly of the opinion that every one must judge for themselves, and no one had any right to interfere, and if it had not been for her mother, she would not have thought of it again. But she knew what it would mean to her. Having been her constant companion for years, she knew well that it would be a death-blow to her, and—which made it worse—it would be an utterly unexpected blow. Once she had taken up her pen to write and warn her mother, but she had thrown it down again. She had no right, she told herself. It was impossible to write, and even if she did make up her mind to do so, it would make no difference. She saw the way John was set, and though she certainly reproached herself and called herself a coward, yet, as day by day slipped by, she was still awaiting events; and although she knew that the inevitable crash must come, yet even she did not realize how near it was.

XIII.

It was the night of Lady Garvagh's ball—the ball which Maud had insisted upon to celebrate her twenty-first birthday. Garvagh House was one of the most beautiful houses in London. It had a celebrated grey marble staircase, and the collection of pictures was considered to be one of the finest private collections which existed. Maud cared little about the pictures—she looked upon them as part of her daily life ; but she was determined that the floor, the band, and the supper should all be of the very best procurable. Aided by Hilda, they had arranged the long gallery and sitting-rooms so as to make as much room as possible, and they were employed the whole morning pushing chairs and sofas about to get them as they liked. Dancing was to be

in the large drawing-rooms, where the finest specimens of Rembrandt, Raphael, and Vandyck's works rejoiced the eyes of many who came not merely to dance.

The weather had favoured Lady Garvagh. A hard frost in the shires had driven the frost-bound hunting men to London at this opportune moment, so she congratulated herself that there would be no lack of men. The ball-room, the staircase, and all the sitting-rooms were filled with chrysanthemums of all shades. Large palms were interspersed amongst these, while great bowls, some containing carnations and some violets, were placed here and there, shedding their fragrance. It was an early ball, and many people had been entertaining dinner-parties for it, among whom was Lady Georgina, who brought the Duchessa and Carmella, Judith Travers, Ralph, Hilda, and several men. They were almost the first to arrive; but the room soon began to fill. Hilda looked particularly well; her pink gown

was most becoming to her fair hair and complexion. Carmella, whose face was always a little too serious for these occasions, was looking radiantly beautiful, although apparently quite unconscious of it. She was dressed in one of the long, white satin gowns which she usually favoured, touched here and there at the waist and on the shoulders with silver embroidery; and on the left side she wore a large bunch of violets, which John had sent her, which gave her a touch of subdued colour. She was much more interested in the pictures than the dancing, and begged her partner to take her through the gallery and let her look at them.

It was nearly half-past twelve when John arrived. He had been fretting and fuming all the evening; but he had long been engaged to give a dinner that night at the Travellers to two old friends of his father's, and they had shown no inclination to leave, till at last, in desperation, he had apologized, left them, and hurried on to Garvagh House. He

advanced into the ball-room, and stood in the doorway for a moment looking for Carmella. He caught sight of her almost immediately, and noticed that she was seated under Raphael's famous picture of the Madonna. The extraordinary resemblance was almost startling. She looked so pure, so saint-like, too, amidst this throng of worldly, gay people. To his eyes suddenly they all vanished; he only saw Carmella, with the beautiful picture above her; one seemed the replica of the other. It only lasted a moment, but was almost like a very beautiful vision.

He was disturbed by a touch from Maud Garvagh, who asked if she should introduce him to any one. He thanked her, but refused; and then, without hesitation, crossed the room, and, approaching Carmella, asked her to dance with him.

She looked up, and smiled. Would the third from this one suit him? She was engaged till then. John thanked her, and withdrew to a corner, from where he could watch her

unobserved. He saw Hilda, too, flying round, evidently enjoying herself much, in spite of the gloomy prognostications about balls. He was amused to see Colonel Vivian, with arms folded and an expression of annoyance on his face, watching her; evidently she had not been kind to him. But his absorbing interest was his coming dance with Carmella, and for that he waited, keeping his eyes upon her as much as possible, so as to be ready to keep his engagement the moment his dance began. It seemed an age; but at last he saw her approaching the Duchessa with her partner. John advanced, and claimed his dance. Silently she walked by his side till they reached the door of the ball-room. He led her through the long picture-gallery, hardly pausing; he had no need of pictures when he had her to look at, this lovely, living picture. He went on till he reached the little sanctum, Lady Garvagh's sitting-room, where he had played as a child when once they had stayed there.

The room was banked up with mauve and white chrysanthemums, and Christmas roses in masses were arranged all along the chimney-piece. The music came very faintly to them from the ball-room, and broke the silence, which seemed almost painful after the babble of voices and gay scene they had just left. John pushed a chair towards Carmella, brought another for himself, and then he began to speak. Outwardly he was quite composed.

"Donna Carmella, I have much to say, and I have waited till now for this time. May I speak?"

She bowed her head; her wonderful eyes looked into his for a moment, and then she lowered them again.

"You know," he proceeded gently, he was so afraid of startling her, "that I love you; that soul and body I am yours; that I have no thoughts, no wishes, no hopes apart from you; and also that I am filled with an exceeding gratitude towards you for all you have done for me." She held up her hand with

a deprecating gesture. "Ah! do not speak; let me tell you first. I came back to England, unsatisfied, unconsciously longing for something, I knew not what, and I met you—you, with your beautiful white soul, your faith, your belief; and I thought—yes, I knew—I had met a saint from God." Once more she tried to stop him, but with an imploring gesture he silenced her. "That Sunday—do you remember?—the church, the service there, made me begin to know what religion might be, what it must be to you, and it filled me almost with awe. Then, the walk that afternoon, when we sat together, and you told me of your purpose in life—of your determination to be a nun. Well, at first my soul was dark; it seemed to me that the cup had been held to my lips to be suddenly snatched away. But after a little I began to feel, to know, that you would yet save me; that to you I belonged, and that to me you belonged; and that to you it was given to bring me out of darkness into light.'

Here she interrupted him. "Not to me only," she said, and her look thrilled him, "but to me through the power and love of God."

"Yes"—he leant forward, and the violets she was wearing threw their fragrance towards him—"you, through God, if you will, but still you. The Sunday after you left, I went again to your church at Wyburn. There was a preacher there—I heard his name, but one forgets—and he preached on 'the power of an endless life.' Eternity has always been to me a very beautiful but impossible imagination, and I had rebelled against it, as something the finite mind could not grasp, and therefore impossible. But when I heard him preach—when he said that unconsciously, unbeknown to ourselves, this power of an endless life is always living with us, working in us; that the good done in this world is greatly due to the ministration of that great power—then it came to me, that great and endless power of the Infinite, and it came

through my love for you." Here John threw back his head; her eyes were fixed on him. He went on, "Because my love for you is endless—infinite. Such love as mine must live always. Wherever I may be—whatever may happen to me, even if my body dies—that part of me cannot die, neither in this life, nor in any other life. Therefore, love is immortal—life is immortal. Ah! I cannot explain what I felt, what that knowledge, that certainty, brought with it; but it was as if I had been lost in a dark wood, and had given up hope, and suddenly an unknown path took me into open space and light." He paused; his emotions had almost overpowered him.

"And then"—she spoke eagerly—"you went on; you followed the light?"

"Then," he said gravely, "so much became clear; so much that Protestantism had failed to explain, I found explained by Catholicism, and I read and read, with ever-increasing interest, new lights ever coming to help me.

I am quite happy, quite certain, and only waiting till Monsignor Carnal tells me I am ready to be received into your Church. And now"—again he leant towards her—"of my love for you, too, I must speak a little. Carmella, do not prevent me; tell me that I may have a little hope; tell me that you have not decided on the convent life, that you will renounce it. Speak to me; tell me that you will think of it, that you will—— No; I will not press you. You must come to me of your own free will; you shall tell me what you will, and I must bear it."

He rose and stood by the chimney-piece, recklessly pulling a chrysanthemum to pieces.

There was a long silence, and at last Carmella got up too, and stood beside him. She seemed to find great difficulty in beginning to speak; but she recovered herself, and her voice was low and calm, though now and then it trembled a little.

"It is a great rejoicing to me," she said at last, "because, as you know, my religion is

before everything to me; and if I have been the means of leading you into the true faith, I do indeed rejoice. But it is also a responsibility—Monsignor tells me a great responsibility. Now, I will tell you a little of myself. That Sunday at Wyburn, when we talked—that conversation left me for the first time in my life with two forces wrestling in me. Before I had never doubted—the convent had always stood out clearly in front of me, and all else was as nothing compared with it. But now, since September, it is changed; you and the convent are both before me. To you I owe, perhaps, a great deal, and yet—the convent is still there, too. I pray every day so much, so often, for help and guidance; even when I am not with you, your personality and individuality are so strong that still you are there wrestling with my heart. And now—you know exactly what it is, and what I feel. I cannot answer now. I do not really know my own mind. Will you wait—wait till Christmas is over, till our religion

is one, and then I will give you my answer; more I cannot say."

John took her hand. She did not resist. "Yes," he said; "I will wait—wait in the great hope of you and your love. But Carmella, remember, you hold me in your hand—this little hand"—he caressed it gently—"my soul and my body." Then he smiled, and once more the human side came uppermost. "We are always so grave," he said, "you and I; but I am a human, longing mortal, and in you, too, I think there is a human touch somewhere—but your spirituality is very beautiful to me."

She looked at him, and smiled, though tears were very near the surface.

"I must go now," she said simply; and they left the room silently.

By mutual consent they lingered in the gallery. They could not face the crowd and glare just then; so, under pretence of seeing the pictures, they wandered slowly back, though John afterwards had not the

slightest recollection of any that he had seen.

As they entered the ball-room, the Duchessa met Carmella. It was getting late, she said, and she was tired. Carmella at once fell in with her wish, and expressed great willingness to go home. John took them downstairs, found their carriage, and watched them drive away.

Then he returned to the ball-room, and with considerable difficulty discovered Hilda. But she declined to go home with him; she had many chaperons, and he needn't think of her. Georgie would take her home. So he left her. He was caught by Lady Georgina at the door, who insisted upon his taking her in to supper, and he thought her appetite would never be satisfied. But at last he effected an escape, and, finding his great coat, walked back to Grosvenor Street through the still, frosty night.

He had one of his bad headaches; he took off his hat, and the air gave him great relief. He

let himself in with a latch-key, and, turning on the light, threw himself into a chair in the smoking-room, going over bit by bit, remembering almost every word of his interview with Carmella. He thought how lovely she had looked when she had stood beside him, and had told him she cared for him. Mind waiting! He laughed at the absurdity of the idea. He had waited all his life till he had found her. He closed his eyes; he could hear her voice, he could scent the violets again. Ah, how he would cherish and love her! The world opened out such a vista of love—joy—and the faith, too, which she had brought to him. He sat there till Ralph came, breaking in upon his reverie, and at last he went to bed.

The next day he and Hilda went back to Burton, and the Duchessa and Carmella started on another round of visits.

XIV.

At Mardale, meanwhile, Lady Catherine and Mary had been spending a very peaceful fortnight. The weather had been cold, but beautiful, and they had taken drives in the victoria together—long, silent drives. Lady Catherine was naturally a very silent woman, and Mary could never quite get over the old feeling of her childhood's alarm towards her aunt. They visited the factories in Wyburn, and some of the girls in their own homes. Mary was very busy, preparing endless treats and Christmas-trees for all sorts and conditions, and also making arrangements for their tenants' ball. It was the first they had had for several years, and wanted some organization. But Mary's thoughts, driving, walking, day and night, were always with John. Lady

Catherine had long, flighty letters from Hilda, describing their life and occupations; but from John, after a fortnight's absence, came one short note, telling his mother that he hoped to return in about ten days. Mary carried a heavy heart through all her occupations. She knew that Carmella was in London, and she rightly conjectured that John was spending his time with her. She was too large-minded and generous a nature to feel resentful, but it made her very sad, and she could not bear to think that it might all tend to make him more unhappy, for Hilda's words had sunk deep into her mind. But she was very busy, and it was well for her that she had to rouse herself.

Lady Catherine returned to Burton with Hilda. She was much perturbed that morning by hearing from her sister, with whom she was to have spent Christmas, that she was too unwell to receive them; and Mary, hearing this, instantly pressed them to come to Mardale, quite forgetting that Carmella

was also coming, and if Lady Catherine had heard it, she, too, failed to realize it. Not that it would have given her a moment's uneasiness as regarded John, but she was always afraid of Roman Catholic influence for Hilda; for she never realized that in Hilda's ritualistic tendencies lay her very safeguard.

Christmas came apace, and found Hilda groaning. She had not half presents enough for every one, and had spent all her money. There were no holly berries; she did not know how they were going to decorate the church, but she set to work and made evergreen wreaths, and scoured the country for the few berries which were to be had.

They all went down to Mardale early on Christmas Eve, and that night the Duchessa and Carmella arrived, also Judith Travers. Great joy was caused by telegrams from Guy and Rupert, Lord Empill's two sons, saying they had got leave—one from his ship, and the other from his regiment, which was quartered in Ireland. They added greatly to the

merriment of the party, especially Guy, who had the typical sailor spirits, and to whom nothing came amiss. Balls, Christmas-trees, school feasts; he was equally at home in all, and proved the greatest assistance to Mary.

The festivities began on Christmas Eve with a huge Christmas-tree for all the workmen and their wives, followed by a large supper. Carmella was astonished by the magnificence of the presents, also the huge steaming joints of roast beef; and the holly-bedecked plum-puddings and innumerable mince-pies, gave her an idea of the John Bull appetite.

Then, too, during dinner the waits came up —children singing carols. Wonderfully tuneful it sounded, and the lattice-paned windows of the dining-room were thrown open for a few moments while Lord Empill and Ralph scattered shillings in a reckless fashion.

On Christmas morning every one came down with good wishes and old-fashioned greetings, and Lord Empill seemed to have

presents for all. Even Judith Travers was not forgotten, much to her delight and surprise. Ralph presented Hilda with a magnificent pair of pearl ear-rings, but hastened to assure her it was nothing but a cousinly gift. John had not dared to give Carmella anything which appeared of much value; but when they were alone, he gave her a beautiful little engraving of Rembrandt's picture of the Presentation, which he knew was one of her favourites.

The day was beautiful. Even Lady Catherine was happy. As yet she saw not the dark cloud in the distance, and she was satisfied that so far Carmella appeared to have gained no influence over Hilda. The only little rift in the day was John's refusal to go to church; but disliking, as she did, the ritualistic propensities of Mr. Maddock, she attributed his unwillingness to that cause.

The following night was the tenants' ball. The hall had been cleared for two days, and the floor was like polished glass. Lady

Catherine developed a slight cold, and declared her intention of driving back to Burton in the brougham, as she was afraid of increasing it if she appeared at the ball, and she thought the night would be quieter at Burton. John accompanied her, returning to Mardale after tea. He found every one dressing for an early dinner, and had to hurry to be in time. He noticed with intense pleasure that Carmella had acceded to his request, and was wearing the same white gown she had worn at Garvagh House. Again he had procured violets for her, and they were nestling against the whiteness of her wonderful skin.

Judith looked like a fairy, with soft, much-frilled chiffon skirts, and her fluffy hair very loose and curly. Mary was tired and sad, and her black gown made her look more so. She was weary, body and mind, and in her frame of mind it was all a great ordeal, but her bravery and self-control carried her through it. Ralph roused himself and did his duty manfully for the first two hours,

constantly going round and round in Tempêtes and Swedish dances with farmers' wives and daughters. He had extracted a promise from Hilda that she would dance with him at twelve o'clock. Supper was at eleven, and he knew it would take some time, and he had allowed a safe margin. It was a little before twelve when he went to her and claimed her promise. She was standing listening to Guy, who was discoursing on the exciting, and, to her, novel subject of torpedoes, and she seemed loth to leave it.

"Oh, Ralph, you are before your time."

"Never mind," he answered resolutely; "I am so busy to-night that you must come now. I say, Guy, you ought to take some one in to supper."

Guy went off; and having successfully got rid of him, Ralph turned once more to Hilda.

"Come," he said; "I want to speak to you."

He led her through the library into Mary's little sitting-room, which had not been used that evening.

"I don't think I want to talk," said Hilda, nervously, as the door closed upon them.

"Well, then, you shan't talk; I only want you to listen to me while I tell you a story. It won't take long," he added, a little bitterly.

Hilda sat down silently on the sofa; he threw himself beside her.

"I am telling you this," he said, "because I think it is only fair to yourself and to me. You often do me injustice, Hilda. You call me lazy, desultory. Well, after I have told you this, perhaps you will see that there is a reason, or, at any rate, a cause for it."

He waited to see if she would speak, but she was silent, and he continued—

"I am afraid I have to go back a long time—ancient history almost. Ten years ago I travelled round the world. I had a year's leave, and started with the idea of getting as far as I could in the time. However, I got ill, was laid up with fever on one of the West Indian Islands, and had to stay there a long time. The governor there was awfully

good to me, so were his wife and daughter, and from being grateful, gratitude developed into what I thought was love, and I asked Alice Charville to marry me. My father behaved very well; unlike most fathers, he did not threaten to disinherit me, etc.—in fact, he said if I was happy, then so was he. Well, I thought I was. We were married, and we came back by degrees to England. She suffered horribly from neuralgia; but still I never thought more about it than that it was neuralgia, and I was always trying to find remedies to alleviate the pain when it came. A year after our marriage Jack was born. For a time Alice seemed better, less restless, more contented; and then one night—bah! how can I tell you such horrors?"—he rose from the sofa and stood by the fire—"one night I came back from the country, where I had been fishing, and found her the worse for drink! Ah, Hilda!"—he once more sat down, and lowered his voice—"you can't believe the horrors of it—the shame, the degradation,

and the utter hopelessness for any one like that to help herself or to be helped. I can't tell how we lived through all the time. If it had not been for my father, I don't think it would have been possible. I need not go into details; it was hopeless from the first, had been hopeless long before I found it out. We tried everything, and gave everything up in despair, and it ended as it often does end. She threw herself downstairs one night before the attendants could stop her. Oh, God, when I remember it all!" He bent his head over his hands.

Hilda touched his arm. "Poor Ralph, poor Ralph!" she said, and her voice was troubled. "What can I say? How very, very terrible! One never dreamt of such a tragedy."

He raised his head again, and spoke in an even, hopeless voice.

"No; and the worst of all, the skeleton which walks beside me day and night—a nightmare from which there is no awakening

—is the terrible fear that this curse may probably have descended to Jack. There are times when I have wished the poor little fellow dead; far better that he should be than to live tainted by his mother's inheritance."

"Oh, Ralph, don't! Please don't say such things," pleaded Hilda. "Think of all the helps, the bringing up, the power of the knowledge which you have to keep him from it."

"Yes," he said wearily; "but think for a moment, when he leaves me—at Eton, at Oxford, or, in fact, anywhere. Can I ever be certain that this may not show itself at any moment, unknown to me, to any one? You have no idea, till you have experienced it, the intense cunning, the utter disregard of truth that it brings with it. It becomes a disease, a madness."

"Ralph"—Hilda's voice carried conviction with it—"don't imagine these things; do put them away from you. Look—you are young still; your life is before you. You have no

right to feel like this; it is morbid and unnatural. Some day you will be happy, and then all these terrors will fade away."

"Happiness!" Ralph repeated the word doubtfully. Then he got up once more, and leant against the chimney-piece, looking down at Hilda. "It is only you who can give me that, and you withhold it. Not that I would have you marry me from pity, though I would rather have your pity than any one else's love; but—well, I don't quite seem to know what to say, except that I love you so dearly, so very dearly. But"—and he passed his hand wearily over his forehead—"I have no right to worry you. You have told me you cannot, and I must take it and give it up."

There was a silence, which grew almost oppressive at last. Then Hilda held out her hand.

"I am not worth much," she said, trying to smile. "I am full of faults and inconsistencies, but such as I am, if you care for me, Ralph, well, take me; but"—and a smile

broke over her face—" you will be tired of me directly, and then it will be too late."

Ralph took both her hands. "Do you mean it, Hilda? I don't want to take advantage of you; but if you knew what this means to me! Are you sure it is not pity?"

"I am sure," she said gently, "it is something to be able to give some one happiness."

He took her in his arms. "My little girl, my darling Hilda! I can hardly believe it to be possible."

"There is one thing," she said presently. "Don't, please, Ralph, tell any one about this to-night."

"Not my father?"

"Your father, if you like, but no one else, as my mother must know first. Now, take me back, Ralph. If we stay here people will suspect."

He opened the door, and they made their way back to the hall. Judith gave them a curious look, and Hilda felt that her sharp eyes had been upon her.

John and Carmella had been dancing a good deal together, but they had had no intimate conversation, beyond his telling her that he had heard from Monsignor Carnal, and that he was to be received into the Church on the tenth of January. She had begged him to wait for her answer till after they had returned to London, and he had acquiesced; so they never touched upon the subject which was uppermost in both their minds.

Soon after Ralph got back into the ball-room, Lord Empill decided it was time for them to leave the hall; and after a vote of thanks from the oldest tenant, to which Lord Empill replied in a graceful little speech, in which he alluded to the good terms which had existed between him and his tenants for many years, the party left the hall, the band playing "For he's a Jolly Good Fellow."

They were all tired, and said good night at the top of the stairs. Hilda went into her room, and, throwing open her shutters, let

the moonlight stream into it. She dawdled a great deal, and, in spite of the cold, sat at the open window, contemplating the events of the evening. She was happier than she could have believed it possible to be. Ralph's story had appealed to her, and she told herself that unconsciously she must have liked him all the time—and she had so nearly missed this happiness! She left the window at last, undressed slowly, and got into bed after a long time.

There was a noiseless opening of the door, and Judith appeared, in a long, white dressing-gown, her fluffy hair standing out all round her. She looked, as she stepped across the moonlight, like the ghost of a child with a halo.

Hilda sat up in bed. "You, Judith? I thought you were asleep long ago."

"No, I can't sleep—I am horribly alive to-night; and besides, that band wouldn't let me. Hilda, will that 'Weel may the Keel Row' go on for ever, do you think?"

Hilda laughed. "I don't know," she said.

"Come nearer, Judith; you look so eerie and ghostly in the distance, and I want to tell you something."

Judith approached, and threw herself across the foot of the bed.

"You needn't tell me," she said composedly. "You are going to marry Lord Verncourt."

"You guessed it?" Hilda spoke in a surprised tone.

"Yes, I suppose I did. I suspected it, anyhow, and his face told me the rest. I am glad, Hilda. I may be heartless—perhaps I am—but I am so glad."

"I am glad too, to-night; perhaps I shall be sorry to-morrow," said Hilda. "But it's a commonplace ending to all we imagined."

"I've come to the conclusion," said Judith, as she lit a cigarette and proceeded to smoke it, "that commonplace things are the best in life. They offer no excitements and produce no disappointments, and the commonplace is the only real and tangible thing which exists. Nothing could illustrate it better than that

music. Listen, Hilda; it is the essence of the commonplace, but it is providing amusement to hundreds, I am certain."

Hilda laughed. "Judith, you are quite too odd to-night with your weird appearance and your philosophical sentiments."

Judith did not answer, and for quite ten minutes there was silence between them, while the dancing below went on to its ceaseless, dreary accompaniment. Then Judith got up from the bed, and went towards the slightly open window, and looked out on to the clear, frosty night before her.

"What a night!" she exclaimed, as she looked over the park, which was almost as light as the day. "Not a breath, not a sound, except in this house. It seems strange that we human beings are the only restless ones. Why can't we rest like the animals out there?" Then she turned suddenly and came back to the bed. "Hilda," she said earnestly, "I am so very, very glad about you, because last autumn, when I was here, I was afraid you

were going to be like other people, and that the world was going to overwhelm you and be too much for you. I think you had been through a dark valley somewhere, and you had gone under for the time being."

"Perhaps I had," answered Hilda; "but I should always have come up again, Judith. I have always had great contempt for people who let themselves be overwhelmed by the world, and can't hold their own against it. You remember at Dresden we both agreed we would never let the world make us unhappy, and I think so far we have carried our theories into practice. But I think one becomes rather selfish and perhaps heartless."

"Not you, not you," exclaimed Judith, giving her a hug. "I, perhaps, but not you. There was one face to-night which makes even me sad—Mary Empill's."

"Ah! you have noticed it." Hilda leant forward eagerly.

"She is breaking her heart hopelessly and uselessly," said Judith, solemnly, "and your

brother is going to break his over that Italian girl with the wonderful eyes. Why can't they be content, without wanting what they can't get? But I suppose they will all just go under, and it's no use trying to keep them afloat. I'm going, Hilda. There is 'John Peel.' That generally means a ball is coming to an end in this country, doesn't it? Good night. I've stolen all your beauty sleep, and mine too;" and, opening the door, she went as noiselessly as she came.

She closed the door, and, walking to the dressing-table, moved her fan and gloves, which were lying there. As she did so, she caught sight of a letter on the table, one evidently unopened, in a writing she did not know. It had been forwarded from London, and bore the Pekin post-mark on it. She opened it wonderingly, and read—

"DEAR MRS. TRAVERS,

"I promised Jim I would write for him, as he has been ill, and is still weak. He

had a bad attack of fever, and was really ill for three days; but he is much better, and I am going to take him away for change, which is all he wants. I think you will wonder at not having heard from him lately; but he thinks you will not have worried about it, and I hope you have not. I will write again; he is really almost all right, only weak.

"Yours truly,

"F. ABDY."

Judith put the letter down, and stood quite still. "He thinks you will not worry." Those six words gave her an uncomfortable sensation. They were true, too; she had not worried, she had not even wondered. She looked at the date, eighteenth of November—such a while ago. She stood quite still. She could still hear the music downstairs. Now they were singing "Auld Lang Syne," and something—was it that?—touched a chord somewhere—a chord which, in spite of what she

was, forced tears into her eyes; and, for the first time since she was a child, she threw herself on her bed and cried. She couldn't have said why she cried; she was tired, perhaps, or maybe a glimmer of a conscience and a heart had come to her; but she knew that for a time she, too, had gone under, and dark waters were over her soul—waters of disappointment and weariness, which must come some day even to the selfish and the pleasure-seeker, though the day often tarries.

XV.

HILDA was the first down the next morning, and found only Lord Empill in the dining-room. He came towards her and kissed her with great warmth.

"My dear," he said quaintly, "I have always been fond of you as a niece, but as a daughter I shall be doubly fond, for I know you will make Ralph happy. He tells me that he told you the dreary story of his married life; but I feel sure he did not tell you—what I alone know—of his wonderful kindness and patience all that time. I often wonder how he got through; but a man can't come out of a life like that without feeling the scars of it."

"I think it's wonderful of him, Uncle Empill." Hilda's eyes sparkled. "And just

think what heaven the rest and the peace of the last three years must have been to him. It makes me miserable to think I called him lazy."

Here she was interrupted. Judith came in —Judith, with her baby-face a little pale, and her eyes showing traces of last night's tears. However, her spirits never flagged. She related her experiences of the night before with the farmers with great spirit, and kept Lord Empill amused all through breakfast.

As soon as it was over, Hilda took John aside, and told him of her engagement.

"I am so glad," he had said—"so very glad, Hilda; Ralph is such a good chap."

Hilda made a grimace. "And what of me?" she asked. "No one says I'm a good chap."

John laughed. Mary, who was passing, turned round and asked what was the joke? Then she kissed Hilda very warmly.

"Ralph told me. He is a lucky man, Hilda."

"That's better," said Hilda. "Come, Ralph, we will go on our bicycles to Burton and tell mother, otherwise it seems to me every one will know it before she does."

They found Lady Catherine much better, and delighted to hear the news, although not altogether surprised. It was a great relief to her, for she always dreaded Hilda's determined way of managing her own affairs, and had of late years been oppressed by the thought that she might marry a musician or High Church clergyman! With Ralph she felt she was safe; it was a marriage much to be desired, in spite of the cousinship.

"It's something," said Hilda, slowly, as they came away, walking their bicycles down the rough drive—"it's something that every one seems pleased. We haven't heard any hard words yet. I hope," she continued gaily, "you realize my sacrifice, because I was fully persuaded in my mind that a bishop, and only a bishop, I would marry."

"I knew of your threat," answered Ralph,

"and I was horribly afraid you would throw it at me last night, for, with the best intentions, I could not become a bishop."

"I forgot it at the moment," she said, "or I certainly should have done so. Oh, Ralph!" —suddenly flying, as was her wont, from one subject to another—"we must tell Jack. I wonder what he will say to a step-mother? I feel sure he will judge me from the standard of 'Grimm's Fairy Tales' and the ladies who drowned and starved their step-children."

She jumped on to her bicycle as she spoke, and, regardless of Ralph's remonstrances, coasted down a very steep hill, and covered the distance between Burton and Mardale in what she called a record five minutes.

They found the Duchessa and Carmella just starting, as they had to return to Dorsetshire to spend the New Year. Hilda watched the parting between John and Carmella with great curiosity; but beyond a prolonged hand-shake, and a few words about meeting

in London, she could not see anything to cause even comment.

Luncheon was late, and it was three o'clock before they came out of the dining-room.

John approached Hilda. "Will you walk with me to Burton this afternoon?" he said abruptly.

"No, no, my dear fellow. I can't let Hilda go," answered Ralph, in an expostulatory voice.

John's grave face told Hilda it was something particular, so she put her hand on Ralph's shoulder.

"Dear Ralph, it won't take me long. I will come back here for tea. You can come to Burton and fetch me, if you like; and if mother doesn't want me—I know she will be quite happy with John—I will come back here till to-morrow."

Ralph assented grudgingly, and, soon after, Hilda and John set forth. It was a bright afternoon, and freezing hard. Hilda felt particularly full of vitality, but tried to

subdue her spirits, as she felt sure something serious was coming. John seemed to have some difficulty in beginning, and they talked for some minutes on generalities. At last she tried to help him.

"What is it, John? You are in difficulties. Shall I try and guess, or will you tell me?"

"No; I would rather tell you," he answered. "But give me time, and let me do it in my own way."

For a few minutes there was silence, the only sounds being those of their feet on the crisp, hard ground. Then John began.

"You probably know I am in love with Donna Carmella; in spite of your contrary opinion"—he laughed a little, took off his hat, and ran his fingers through his hair—"I think—no, I should say I hope—that she will marry me."

Hilda was much touched by his humility and diffidence.

"Dear old boy," she said, though she knew her voice expressed doubt, "I do hope

you will have what you wish, and be happy."

"But more than that. I want to tell you," he went on slowly, "that I am thinking of becoming a Catholic almost immediately."

This was a bomb. Hilda stopped suddenly. "Oh, John!" she exclaimed; "not yet; surely not yet." She walked on very fast. "Of course," she resumed, "I knew you were drifting that way; I knew you had inclinations—in fact, I thought you would become one eventually. But so soon! so soon! And mother—what of her, John? Have you attempted to prepare her?"

"No," he said, with a resolute tone in his voice. "I am going to tell her to-night."

"Ah!" she said, "you have left it too long already."

"How could I tell her before?" he retorted. "I couldn't know my own mind; I couldn't speak until I was certain of myself. What could I say? It would only have distressed her, and it might have ended in nothing."

Hilda was silent for a moment, then she spoke again.

"Have you ever thought, all these weeks, when you were going this way, what it will mean to her?"

"I have thought," he answered gravely. "I know it will be a terrible disappointment and sorrow to her. But what can I do, Hilda?"

"Disappointment and sorrow," she repeated slowly, ignoring the latter question; "these are poor words to describe. It will simply break her heart. She will never get over it. Oh, John, think! You know what she is; her hatred of anything approaching to Romanism, her almost bigotry. How *can* she ever get over it? Are you certain of yourself? Don't think me interfering—I ought to have spoken long ago, but I was a coward—but are you not doing this because of your great love for Carmella? Has not she cast a glamour over you, over the religion, and you see it through her? Unconsciously

you believe in her faith because you believe in her?"

"No," he answered resolutely. "I believe in the faith itself, apart from Carmella, apart from the emotional side. The truth"—he spoke almost piteously—"the truth is hard to get at. I have reached it for the first time in my life. I know it, and I am happy in it, as I never dared hope I should be."

Hilda was silenced; she felt there was no more to be said. She had done what she could, but only at the eleventh hour. Her mother must suffer, John must suffer too, and there was no help for it; only she could not shake off the uncomfortable presentiment that Carmella would not marry him.

As they turned into the courtyard she felt she had been unsympathetic, almost unfriendly, in her great anxiety to ward off this coming catastrophe. She took his arm, and her voice was very kind and gentle.

"John, I am afraid I can do very little to help you in this with mother; but you

know, don't you, how much I want you to be happy? I would give away all my own happiness for yours; and whatever may come, let us always be with each other in sorrow and in joy."

She broke off, and caressed the deer-hound, who had bounded out to meet her, full of joy at her return.

They found Lady Catherine in her sitting-room. She expressed herself delighted to see John, and evidently looked forward with much pleasure to her evening with him. They all three sat and talked till tea was brought in, and Ralph appeared at the same time; but even then it seemed as if Hilda could not make up her mind to leave her mother. She lingered till at last Ralph grew impatient and carried her off.

XVI.

JOHN and his mother dined early. The servants were tired, she said, after the dissipations of the night before, and she wanted to give them an early evening. She was intensely happy at getting John back, and having secured him for an evening to herself; and the consciousness of this made John extremely uncomfortable. His conscience continually smote him, and he felt almost criminal when he contemplated the blow he had to deal her.

The presence of the servant during dinner was a great help, as it forced the conversation into general channels, and there was no possibility of touching on dangerous topics. They discussed Hilda's engagement, the probable date of her marriage, and John was almost feverish in his endeavours to keep

the ball of conversation rolling. But dinner came to an end, and he felt that he could not put it off any longer. He followed his mother across the hall into the sitting-room. She asked him to throw some logs on the fire, and then, sitting down on the sofa, made a gesture to him to sit beside her. He obeyed, telling himself he could not begin; he would give himself another five minutes. She put her hand on his, and told him again what a pleasure, what a joy, it was to be with him. Then he felt he could delay it no longer. He got up and stood with his back to the fire. Lady Catherine was occupied with her knitting; she did not see his face.

"Mother"—his voice sounded forced and strained—"I have something to tell you."

Lady Catherine looked up from her work, but even then there was no real alarm in her face, only a slight surprise.

"Something to tell me?" She repeated his words with perhaps just a shade of anxiety

in her voice. "Nothing serious, I hope?" She smiled as she spoke.

John pulled himself together; it was no use fencing. He must tell it now, tell it all. He looked straight at his mother.

"I have asked Donna Carmella to marry me;" and he paused. The next words came with great difficulty. "I am going to become a Roman Catholic."

For some moments there was silence—a heavy, intense silence, broken only by the hissing of the fire and the ticking of the clock.

Then a cry broke from his mother. "Oh, John! my boy! my boy!"

John never forgot it; it was the cry of some one who had received a death wound—a cry of exceeding bitterness. In a moment he was beside her.

"Mother, don't look like that—speak to me. Tell me you don't think it is so very dreadful."

She recovered herself with an immense effort. She was a true Spartan, this woman.

"It cannot be true," she said at last in a low voice; "you cannot do it."

John did not answer. She spoke again.

"You do not know what you are doing; you are under some strange influence. You, my son, become a Papist? It is not true."

"Yes," he said quietly, "quite true. I have entirely made up my mind; I am quite convinced."

"And this"—Lady Catherine spoke in an uncompromising tone of voice—"this has been done secretly, behind me—undermining your religion, deceiving me. Truly the ways of the Roman Catholics are beyond belief."

"No"—John spoke eagerly—"there has been nothing underhand, nothing done secretly. I, and I only, am answerable for it. I began by being interested; I passed on to believe and realize that they hold the true faith, the only true faith."

"And who," asked Lady Catherine, sarcastically, "has taught you to believe, who has misled you? I need not ask—the girl whom

you intend to marry, whose beauty, I suppose, has infatuated you. She has cast a spell over you, John. Be true to yourself; see it in the real light. You are a soul to be saved. As such she probably regards you, and all else is swallowed up in that."

"You are quite wrong," he said, somewhat doggedly. "I believe in the religion apart from any one. No one has forced me; no one has even persuaded me; I am acting entirely by my own free will and convictions."

They stood confronting each other, recognizing in one another the force of their two resolute wills. In his look Lady Catherine realized the great danger; she was fighting for life and death, and it was going to be a terrible struggle.

"John"—there was a pleading tone in her voice—"believe me, you have been misled; you have been told only one side of all this, and you have blinded yourself to everything but that one side. Listen to me. Come away with me, right away from

these influences, these persuasions. I will go with you anywhere; together we will wrestle with this, and conquer it. My boy, believe me, you do not know what you are doing, and you owe it to me that you should think it over—think it out, free from all those who have surrounded you these last few months. John, will you come with me?"

"No," he said. "I am so sorry to refuse you, mother, but I cannot. Why is it so very dreadful to you? Will it not help you if I tell you that since my mind is made up, I have been happier than I have ever been before; that all my doubts are over, and it is the only religion in which I can find rest and happiness?"

Once more there was silence, and when Lady Catherine spoke again, her voice was hard and cold.

"I cannot believe," she said, "that it is possible. Can you reconcile yourself to their superstitions, I might almost say idolatries — the worship of the Virgin Mary,

the infallibility of the Church and the Pope?"

"Yes," he said simply; "I believe, I am convinced, that the Catholic Church is the ancient Church of the Fathers, and I think the Intercession of the Virgin Mary is a very beautiful belief."

Again there was a pause.

"God is punishing me greatly," she said. "I am responsible for this terrible calamity."

John looked at her with great astonishment. What did she mean?

"I threw the temptation in your way," she proceeded—"I, your mother, who should have guarded you and protected you. I invited Carmella to stay here—I, who would willingly have died rather than this should have overtaken me. I suppose she is triumphant, satisfied. She has gained her object, and a mother's misery will be nothing to her."

"Mother, don't say such dreadful things. You don't know Carmella, if you think that of her. She is so good, such a beautiful

nature; it would break her heart to think she had caused you unhappiness."

Lady Catherine rose. John saw she took hold of a chair for support.

"It is no use," she said, "prolonging this conversation. It is only extremely painful; my entreaties you will not listen to. You will not accede to my request, and"—she paused—"I don't think I can bear much more."

She walked towards the door. John saw her steps trembled; he offered her his arm.

She did not take it. "I would rather be alone," she said. "Do not come; I can go by myself."

He followed her a few steps, and he heard her unconsciously whisper to herself, "It is a death-blow to me. What have I done to deserve this?" He watched her upstairs, out of sight; he almost made up his mind to follow her, but gave up the idea, and stood listening for her steps in the room above where he was sitting.

He, too, had been terribly distressed at her

reception of the news. She had put great control over herself, he had seen; but that did not hide the fact from him of what she was suffering. He went slowly back to the fire. "Hilda was quite right," he said aloud. "Her heart is broken, and no one can help her." He thought of her devotion to him, of the many sacrifices when he was a child; he went over and over again all the little things which had gone to make up his life, and he saw and realized that to her the bitterest part of it all was the knowledge that these months had overturned and destroyed all the lifelong influences, the cherished illusions, which she had imagined were impregnable.

As he passed his mother's door he paused. But there was no sound, and he went on to his room.

Could he have seen her, there on her knees, praying that she might be forgiven, praying that this might be removed from her, asking God even that she might die, would it have made any difference in their coming lives?

XVII.

JOHN came downstairs early the following morning. He had not slept much; he was never a very good sleeper at the best, and any worry always kept him awake. He had been very much distressed at the scene which had taken place with his mother, and he was rather dreading meeting her again. He wrote a hurried line to Hilda, telling her that he would be very grateful if she would come back early, and that it had been much worse than he had expected. He took the note to the stables, and despatched it, after which he roamed about till breakfast was ready. To his great relief, Hilda walked in before he had finished.

"Oh, John," she exclaimed in her impulsive way, "was it very dreadful?"

"Terrible," he answered wearily. "I can't tell you, Hilda, all that passed, but I don't think, if I had known, I should have dared tell her; I should have written it. But it is over now," he added.

"I think," said Hilda, after a pause, "I will go up and see mother; she will probably have heard me come."

She closed the door. John heard her moving about upstairs, and the sound of voices. In ten minutes she returned; she looked pale and worried.

"How is she?" he asked eagerly.

"She is well in herself," she answered, "but terribly broken and sad. It is dreadful to see her, and one cannot help her." Hilda sat down, and suddenly burst into tears.

"Don't, Hilda; I can't bear it."

She controlled herself with a great effort. "It is all so wretched," she said in a broken voice, "when it ought to be so happy. You can't help it, John; it isn't your fault; no one

is to blame—except," she added mentally, "the Duchessa."

John walked restlessly up and down the room.

"I think I shall go away," he said at last. "Don't you think it would be the best thing I can do?"

"I think it would," she answered—"for a bit, anyway; and don't come back till—till you have become a Catholic. When it is irrevocable, she may realize that it is so, and that may help a little. But where will you go?"

"The Garvaghs asked me to go to them this week or next. I can go there till I go to London. I can't get away till to-morrow. But, Hilda, couldn't you ask Mrs. Travers to come here? Mother likes her, and it would be so much better if we had some one before whom it would be impossible to talk anything intimate."

Hilda acquiesced, and wrote a note to Judith, begging her to come there, if possible, to stay. John offered to walk down to

Mardale with it, Hilda telling him he had better stay there to luncheon, and tell Ralph to come up to luncheon with her. The latter obeyed with great promptitude, and arrived before his time; but as soon as Hilda saw him in the courtyard, she ran down to meet him.

"Oh, Ralph, I am so glad to see you!"

He kissed her. "My child, you are worried?" He looked anxiously at her.

"Yes, I am."

She led him into the dining-hall, and, shutting the doors carefully, sat down on the arm of his chair.

"You remember last night I told you I had a trouble, but I would rather not tell you just then?" He nodded. "John had told me yesterday that he wanted to marry Carmella; in fact, intimated he was almost as good as engaged."

"Well"—Ralph smiled—"that is not a great calamity, is it?"

"Not that alone, but what it brings with it.

He intends to become a Roman Catholic almost immediately."

Ralph gave a long whistle. "That is rather serious," he admitted. "But, after all, Hilda, it is his affair, and I am broad-minded enough to think that if he has made up his mind, and wishes it, I don't think it matters much to any one else. I suppose he considers the beautiful Carmella 'vaut bien la Messe.' Has he told Aunt Catherine yet? What will she say?"

"That's just it," answered Hilda, eagerly. "Nothing else matters but her. He told her last night, and I imagine they had a terrible scene. John sent for me to come here early this morning. I found him alone at breakfast, looking much worried, and then I went upstairs and found mother. Ralph"—lowering her voice—"it breaks my heart to see her; she has aged ten years in the last night, and she looks so dreadfully miserable. I can see, too, she thinks it is a judgment on her for having had Carmella here, whereas the only

one really to blame is the Duchessa." Hilda got up, and almost stamped about the room. "She was determined to bring it about from the first; she meant John to marry Carmella. For what reason I don't know, but she did. She set to work to proselytize him—she—belonging to our Church—worse than any Jesuit I call her—and"—very bitterly—"she has almost accomplished her ends. I suppose she is triumphant, and even if she knew, would not care for mother's broken heart and wretchedness. What are we to do, Ralph?"

"I don't see you can do anything," he said slowly. "Time, I suppose, will soften it to Aunt Catherine. It must be a shock; you could not expect anything else. But people have to get over these things in life, and she will, too. Don't get morbid over it, Hilda."

"Hush! I hear her coming."

Lady Catherine opened the door and came in. Ralph was startled, though he tried not to show it. The lines in her face had intensified, and Hilda had not exaggerated when she

had said she had aged by ten years. Ralph felt very sorry for her. He got up and tried to greet her as if nothing had happened, but she interrupted him.

"Hilda will have told you of my great sorrow. You will understand when I tell you I am very much troubled, and forgive if I am not quite myself." Her voice broke.

Ralph took her hand. "Dear Aunt Catherine," he said.

She recovered herself, and continued—"I would rather no one knew anything of it at present, not even your father; while there is a glimpse of hope that my unhappy boy may still in time see the terrible errors he has been led into, and the sin he is about to commit—the less said about it the better—and"—she drew herself up—"I could not bear that any one should mention it to me—not even you, Hilda—but let us pray without ceasing that this terrible thing may not happen."

As she finished speaking, she led the way to the luncheon-table, the others following

her; and it was she who led the conversation all through the meal, much to the amazement of the other two. She never asked where John was, and expressed no surprise at his absence. She declared herself pleased that Judith was to be their guest. Curiously enough, she had been much attracted by her, and Judith was always at her best at Burton. After luncheon she declared her intention of resting in her room, and Ralph and Hilda went for a walk.

John did not return till the evening, and brought Judith Travers with him. Hilda, Ralph, and his mother were having tea together when they arrived, and he went up to Lady Catherine and kissed her. Hilda saw a sudden spasm pass over her face, and was afraid she was going to break down; but she recovered herself almost instantly, and greeted Judith warmly. The latter was a great help; her gay prattle was ceaseless, and, being utterly unconscious of all that had taken place, she was perfectly natural.

At dinner John casually mentioned his intention of going away the next day. Hilda furtively watched her mother; but beyond growing a shade paler, Lady Catherine betrayed no signs of emotion. Perhaps she felt that her powers of endurance were not exhaustless, and that she could not keep up like this always. The evening had passed off better than Hilda had dared expect that it would, but it was an immense relief to her when bedtime came; the strain, she told herself, was frightful for them all; they could not continue at this high tension. It was better—far better—that John should go. Her heart ached for him—for her mother, too; it was all very miserable. The first day of her engagement! It had not been a very brilliant beginning, she told herself; but, nevertheless, the consciousness of Ralph's affection was a great comfort to her—the only bright spot amidst all the darkness. To-day the world had seemed as if all were slipping away from her. Ralph was the only surety she had, and

to him she turned with a strong sense of security.

The next morning John started for the Midlands. He told himself that this next week had to be got through somehow, and this was the best solution of it. But the Garvaghs were astonished by the apparent restlessness and impatience which he could not conceal.

As soon as the week was over he left for London, and two days after his arrival there he was received into the Roman Catholic Church.

XVIII.

JOHN waited two days before he tried to find Carmella, and then, on calling in Eaton Square, was told they were not expected for three days. He turned away greatly disappointed. He had made so sure they were there, and now he must curb his impatience for three more days. The suspense was telling on him; he suffered a great deal from headaches, and his eyes got a strained, anxious look in them.

After calling in Eaton Square, he went back to Grosvenor Street, and made up his mind that he must write the letter which he had been trying to compose for two days—the letter to his mother. It had to be written, he knew; but it was so very difficult, so much harder than he had imagined it would be. At

times he tried to make himself believe that Hilda's idea was the right one, that Lady Catherine might reconcile herself to the inevitable; but in his heart he knew that no reconciliation was possible, that, with her nature, this was out of the question. Well, he must get it over. It hurt him dreadfully to think of what she would go through when she opened his letter, but delay only made it harder. He drew the inkstand towards him and wrote. The words came more easily than he had anticipated, but he felt they were stilted and unnatural. He wrote on steadily till he had finished.

"My dearest Mother,

"After our conversation a fortnight ago, you will not be surprised to hear that I have entered the Catholic Church. I know that you think I do not realize how great a pain it is to you; but, indeed, I do. I thought after I left you; indeed, during the last fortnight I have often and often gone

over and over again all you said to me—your arguments—I think I may say I have looked at them all with a free mind, and arguing, as it were, against my own convictions; but I know, I am sure, that for me I am doing what I know is right, and that apart from this there is no peace, no happiness. Will you try and think this? Will you not condemn me utterly without first thinking this, and then perhaps it may soften the blow a little to you? Mother dear, we have loved each other with more than ordinary love; do not let this, I implore of you, separate us; it would be more than I could bear to think of. Surely love like ours cannot be killed; it must survive. For a time there is a cloud; but it will clear, and we will be as we were. Tell me this, tell me that this will make no difference, that we are still as much to each other, and that nothing can separate us.

"Your loving son,

"JOHN."

He did not even read it over; he felt if he had he would not have sent it. He sealed it, and, taking it himself, dropped it into the nearest pillar-box. He gave a sigh of relief as he heard it fall, and knew that the deed was done.

At the end of the week, he stood again on the steps of Eaton Square. They had arrived, and Carmella was at home. He was shown into the morning-room, and by the fading afternoon light he saw her at the far end. The servant announced him, and left the room. Carmella rose, and came forward to meet him; she did not speak.

"Carmella"—he took both her hands—"I am here for my answer. Will you give it to me now?"

She raised her eyes, but still she did not speak, only she trembled a little.

"Tell me," he said again—the look in her eyes had given him hope—"tell me yourself—will you come?"

She threw back her head, and her voice came quite clearly.

"Yes," she said, "I will."

For a moment there was a silence, the joy was almost too great; then John drew her to him, and kissed her very gently, with a feeling of almost awe; but it was a supreme moment. This love—he had sought it, he had found it, and in that kiss he seemed to have reached the goal. The best that life could offer was here given him, and the wonderful look in her face he carried with him many a day and night. For there was almost a divine touch which overcame the humanity at that moment, and filled them both with a great and intense joy.

But after a bit youth and life stole over their senses, and they were again on the earth. So much they had to say, so much to compare. From the first day of their meeting down to the present day, he drew a picture to her of his hopes, his love, his doubts; and she, too, had her thoughts to

tell him—that old, old story, so old and yet so new, always so full of interest and excitement.

The Duchessa came in at last, and she saw by their faces that the thing she had wished for had come to pass.

"My dear, dear children"—she approached them, and took a hand of each—"I am so glad. It is such a great happiness;" and as she kissed Carmella a great sense of rest came over her, for her object was accomplished, her goal was reached.

She did not stay long with them. Telling John she hoped he would stay and dine with them as he was, she left the room again.

That evening and the following day stood out to John during the weeks which followed as the most perfect happiness which man could attain to. The revelation of Carmella's character to him, the purity, the natural goodness and gentleness of her disposition, opened out hour by hour to him, and now that the great question of her life was decided upon,

the playfulness and merriment, too, asserted itself, and she was a charming companion. He felt he could hardly tear himself away from her, and was filled with gratitude to the Duchessa, who, having returned to England and her English habits, allowed them to be together as much as possible.

On one point Carmella was firm: no one must know of their engagement until her return to Rome, when she intended to visit the convent, and tell the Mother Superior herself of her renunciation of the convent life. The Duchessa begged of her to write instead; it would be much better, she argued. But Carmella would not agree; and John, anxious to fall in with all she asked, took her part. His mother was his only stipulation. She must be told, and in this Carmella acquiesced most warmly.

"She will not welcome me, John, *caro mio*," she had said sadly. A sudden shadow had fallen over her face, and John could not reassure her.

On the second evening of their engagement he once more took up his pen, and wrote to his mother—a short letter; it was so difficult to write when she had not answered the other one. He simply stated the fact of his engagement. But to Hilda he had enlarged on his great happiness; her sympathy was assured. That day at Burton she had helped him and comforted him, and he felt that she would be glad for his sake.

The next morning, as he was leaving Grosvenor Street for Eaton Square, a telegram was handed to him, forwarded from Burton. He opened it carelessly, but as he read it, his heart sank, and his face expressed great anxiety. It was from a man called Winter, who occupied the next sheep farm to his in Australia.

"Charlie very ill," it ran; "things going badly; think you ought to come at once."

He stopped in the street as he read it over and over again. His brain refused to grasp it. It meant—good heavens! it meant that

he must go—leave Carmella—leave his newly found happiness—immediately, too. No; it was impossible. He put the telegram into his pocket. The thing was impossible: he could not go. Charlie would be the last person to wish it, if he knew: no one could expect him to go. And yet—the other voice came—Charlie was very ill, he must be very bad, or Winter would never have sent that telegram, and he was probably alone. Still, he could not do it; he set his face once more against it. He walked very slowly across the Park. All the joy seemed suddenly to have gone from him; but as he went up the steps in Eaton Square, and rang the bell, he knew, he was quite certain, that he would go—that he must.

He met the Duchessa on the stairs, and he silently handed her the telegram.

"You will not go?" she said; but her voice had a strange tone of fear in it.

The very fact of her doubt made John know at once that there was only one thing

to be done, and he wondered he had ever doubted it.

"Yes," he said simply, as he took back the telegram; "I must go, and at once."

The Duchessa spoke very earnestly. "John, I beg of you—wait, wait; a month, three weeks. We will hurry it on. But marry her, and take her with you."

"Wait three weeks!" John was sorely tempted.

The Duchessa noticed his hesitation, and immediately took advantage of it.

"She will not be quite secure from her old influences until she is married," she urged. "It would be foolish to leave her to them now."

John still wavered. Then suddenly the strong sense of duty—that inherited Puritan sense of duty—swallowed up all else.

"I must go," he said resolutely. "Don't make it harder for me. Three weeks! Supposing he died, what then?"

The Duchessa shrugged her shoulders, and though she dared not put it into words, still

it seemed to her nothing else in the world mattered as long as their marriage was an accomplished fact.

But John left her. He could not spare any moments from Carmella; his time was short. He found her in the morning-room. He gathered her into his arms, and as he did so, a sharp pain ran through him as he thought of the many coming lonely days.

"My child," he said, after a moment, drawing her to the sofa, and sitting beside her, "I have had bad news. Read that." He handed her the telegram.

She read it through once or twice before she seemed to grasp the meaning of it. Then she looked up.

"You must go to him." She spoke very gently, but in a decisive tone of voice.

John could not trust himself to speak for a moment.

"Yes, I must go," he repeated mechanically.

He bent towards her and kissed her, and that seemed to break the tension.

"Carmella"—he held her hands tight—"do you know what this means to me—the six weeks' journey taking me further and further from you, the misery of leaving you, the weeks and months before I can look again on your beloved face? Can I bear it?"

"Yes," she said, still very gently, "it is a terrible blow, John; it will be a great sadness; but we must think of the home-coming. Let us look forward to that; that thought will be a help and comfort, and our souls, John, will always be together in our Church, in our prayers."

"Ah," he said, after a moment's pause, "I don't think you know, Carmella; you can't realize how my whole life is bound up in yours. I suppose it is," he added simply, "because I have never cared before; it is all crowded into this."

She smiled, and took his hand. "It is so strange that we two should have waited all this time, as it were, for each other."

"Yes, and to be parted now. Carmella"—he got up suddenly and paced the room—"do you know, do you take in, that the mail goes to-night, that there are only a few hours left to us?"

"To-night!"—her face grew very white—"only till to-night! Oh, John, that is terribly soon!" Two large tears forced themselves into her eyes.

John was beside her in a moment. "My darling, what a brute I am! I think only of myself. Carmella, we must be brave; we must, as you said, think only of the home-coming, of our next meeting."

She controlled herself. "Yes," she said; "let us be brave. Come, John; you will have so much to do. Let me come with you and help you. Let us get it done, and then we can come back and have the last bit quietly together here."

John acquiesced. She left the room to get her hat, and he meanwhile looked out the trains, and made a short list of necessaries

required. He felt he must be doing something, or the thought of the coming separation would overwhelm him.

Carmella reappeared, and they started together. It all took longer than they expected, and it was past two o'clock when they returned to Eaton Square. They hurried over luncheon, and went upstairs together, the Duchessa discreetly remaining below. Those last two hours seemed to take to themselves wings. John sat tightly grasping her hand, his heart sore with the coming separation, yet endeavouring to keep up to help her. Carmella sat very still, hardly talking, her face very pale, and her dark eyes full of intense feeling. John could only tell her over and over again that he loved her; that of her, and her only, was his heart full. And the minutes passed into hours, and the time was nearly up. The door opened, and the butler came to say the cab and luggage had arrived from Grosvenor Street. He went out again. John got up

from the sofa; his whole face was quivering with emotion.

"Carmella, I cannot bear it—this good-bye. I cannot go."

"Hush!" She rose, and put both her hands on his shoulders. "John, let us remember, we must be brave. Help me; let me help you."

He caught her to him. "Tell me," he said eagerly, hungrily—"tell me that you love me. Give me something to carry away with me, to live on all these months, to help me to bear it——"

She stood there facing him, her pale face glowing with his passionate kisses.

"John," she said quite softly, and her voice seemed to pour balm into his sore heart, "I love you, so very, very much. All these months I shall be thinking of you and praying for you. *Amore mio*, good-bye." She raised her head; once more their lips met in one long kiss.

"My little love, good-bye." John's voice

was husky; he could not bear it any longer. He looked once more into her eyes, and then he was gone.

The Duchessa met him downstairs. He had no words; he wrung her hand. The door closed upon him, and he was driven rapidly away

XIX.

THE great ship went ploughing its way through heavy seas. John was a good sailor, and it mattered little to him. Just after they started he remembered a letter, lying unopened in his pocket, in his mother's handwriting. He took it down to a quiet corner of the saloon and opened it.

"MY POOR BOY" (it ran),

"Your letter was a death-blow to me, for although it is quite true that it was expected, still the blow comes with no less force. I suppose one hopes against hope even to the end, and no loss I have experienced comes near to me as the loss of your soul. If God in His great mercy will again some day bring you into the light, I may

recover it, but now my punishment is greater almost than I can bear. I have cherished you, I have loved you—perhaps more than I ought—and I have been the means of your ruin. It is the bitterness of this knowledge which lives with me day and night, and from which I cannot free myself. I cannot write more—you will not expect it; and I cannot see you. In time we must meet, but I could not bear it now. Night and day I pray for you—— "

The letter ended abruptly, with no signature. John's heart ached as he realized the bitterness of her sorrow, and noticed the trembling, broken writing, so unlike his mother's firm, upright hand. He felt he could give her no comfort, and he could never convince her that she had not been to blame. He tore up the letter. It was a living reproach to him; he could not bear to keep it. He resolutely resolved to put the thought of it as much away from him as possible.

Indeed, all these days his thoughts, waking and sleeping, were engrossed with Carmella. He sat for hours on deck, hardly conscious of the presence of other passengers, living in a day-dream, going over and over again through the last three days—all they had talked of, and of their mutual love and confidences. Several of his fellow-passengers—both men and women—tried to make advances to him; but he resented any disturbance of his thoughts, and escaped, as soon as was possible, back to his day-dreams, so at last they gave up trying to be friends with him.

So the weeks passed, and the voyage came nearly to an end. Six weeks, John told himself—the longest he ever remembered—were over, and the last day had come. The great throbbing, untiring engines were nearing the end of their work, and land was in sight. John stood on deck, watching the concourse of people assembled on the pier as they approached, and never moved, not even when the ship drew up alongside, and the ropes were thrown

on board. They crowded on—friends, lovers, husbands, wives; John watched them all absently. He stood there quietly waiting for his turn to go ashore. Suddenly his arm was touched, and to his astonishment he recognized George Winter, the sender of the telegram.

"John, you are a good fellow; you must have started at once. I am glad you are here."

"How is Charlie, George?"

"Dying," he answered briefly. "It may be weeks; it might end at any moment."

John was much shocked. "Dying!" he repeated. "Are you sure, George? It seems so impossible."

"It's true, though. He caught a cold a month after you left, neglected it, and began to take care of it when it was too late. It's consumption; you know he's always had delicate lungs; several of his family died of it."

John was silent. He felt at that moment he could not speak.

"I sent that telegram," resumed his friend, as they got into the conveyance which he had brought to drive John the forty miles up country—"I sent that telegram when the doctor told me it was hopeless. The poor fellow was longing to see you, but he would not let me write, and I telegraphed unbeknown to him. Whenever I begged him to let me write to you, he always said, 'Let him alone, George; he has had eight years of this cursed life, and I am sure by his letters he is happy.'"

There was a long silence, while John reviewed it all in his mind, and shuddered as he thought what a chance his coming had been.

His best friend dying! Yes; he seemed to have known all the time he was dying, and he had doubted as to whether he should come. Not Carmella. Thank God, she had never doubted; she had known from the first he must go.

"Does he know I am coming?" he asked at last.

"Yes, he does now. I told him a week ago. You see, in your telegram from London you only put 'Coming,' and I did not know if you could have caught this boat. I didn't want him to have too long to wait; he's alone mostly all day, and he broods over things. I wanted to have a nurse for him, but he won't have any one but Bill—you remember that man who did the house-work. He has turned out quite a good nurse."

They did not talk much after that except on farming matters.

"I've tried to do what I could for you," Winter told him. "Things have been going to rack and ruin on your farm, and that worried Charlie a good deal."

John thanked him, and the rest of the drive was passed discussing their affairs. Towards evening, as they came in sight of the dreary little wood house, George Winter returned once more to the subject of his friend's illness.

"You will find him awfully changed," he

said. "I shan't come in with you; he would rather have you to himself to-night. Give him these lemons from me; the cough and thirst are the worst part of the illness."

John nodded, and they drew up at the house. He left the boy to take out the things, and passed on through the sitting-room. How dreary it looked!—so much worse than he had thought. He opened the door beyond.

Charlie was sitting up in bed, his whole face aglow with pleasure; but, in spite of Winter's warning, John experienced a great shock. Was it possible that this was Charlie Finley—this living skeleton, the man he had left full of life and health? And now, his whole frame wasted to a shadow, his hands so frail you could almost see through them. Unconsciously he repeated to himself his words to the Duchessa—"He is probably alone and dying!" "Alone and dying!" The words seemed written up everywhere—the whole room was full of it. He was brought

back by Charlie's voice, which was the same, only weaker.

"John, dear old fellow, this is good of you."

For a moment John could not speak. "I wish," he said, and his voice was choked—"I wish I had known. I ought to have been here long ago."

His friend smiled. "Don't say that. I did so wish you to enjoy yourself, and all I wanted was to see you some time. I am dying, John. I am a long way through, and I hope it won't be long now."

John wrung his hand, but he could not speak, and for some moments there was no sound in the room, except the laboured breathing. He was so weak, the excitement had been too much for him, and he could not talk any more. John sat by his side far into the night, helping him, raising his pillows, giving him drink. Towards morning he got quieter, and John fell asleep on the bed in the other corner of the room. It was truly a sad home-coming on this side.

XX.

For nearly three weeks did John tend his dying friend, through all the ups and downs of the terrible disease. Some days Charlie would lie dozing almost the whole day; other days the cough and the weariness were very great, and John hardly dared leave him for a moment. Then, again, some evenings he rallied, and seemed to take an interest in the outer world.

One evening, during the first ten days, he suddenly raised himself and looked at John, who was sitting over the fire.

"Come nearer," he said; "I want to talk."

John obeyed, and sat down by his bed.

"Tell me," he said, "what has changed you. You are changed. Somehow you are much happier, much more contented.

Something has happened to you while you were in England. Will you tell me? Don't be afraid it will tire me; it doesn't. It takes me from myself and my thoughts; it would do me good."

John looked at him, and then he couldn't help it. He told him all. All these weeks he had been nursing his love, his disappointment, and he was thirsting for sympathy. He must talk, and to some one who could understand. Charlie listened with unflagging interest and intense astonishment. He had guessed John was in love; he had noticed his absence of mind at times, and his eagerness for letters; but he had never suspected the change of religion, and that was a great revelation to him. John told it all so simply, revealing unconsciously so much in the telling of the story. When he had finished, Charlie raised himself, and stretched out his hand to him.

"John, there is no one in the world like you. You know what I wish you—the best

that life has in store for you—and for her."

He fell back as he spoke, and his cough seized upon him once more. John flew to help him, blaming himself for his selfishness, his carelessness, in allowing him to talk so long and to become excited. After a little, when Charlie got his breath again, he thanked John for telling him, and for having confided in him; but the excitement brought on a restless night, and John cursed his own egotism.

After that day he seemed to take very little interest in anything. John hardly left him. One day he rode down to the post-office, twelve miles away, to see if there was a letter in the much-longed-for handwriting. The postman put two into his hand, and he walked by the side of his horse while he eagerly devoured the contents. One was from Carmella, the first he had ever had, breathing love and tenderness all through, telling him how long the days were without

him, how already she was longing for his return to her. They were going, she said, in a week, back to Rome—from there she would write again. Her picture, too, the one the Duchessa had had painted for herself, but which John had insisted upon keeping, was finished, and she had left it ready packed for him in Grosvenor Street.

For a moment, as he read, all else was forgotten. Australia, his dying friend, seemed a long way off; he was once more with Carmella. From having lived so much alone he had a wonderful power of imagination, and now he seemed to look into her eyes, and to hear her speaking to him. God! how he loved her.

The horse started suddenly, and John's day-dream was snapped. He folded up the letter, gave a long sigh, and looked at the other one. Hilda wrote full of sympathy and affection. She was so glad to think of his happiness. Of her mother she did not say much, beyond that she was going with

her to London, and she hoped that the change would do her good, and divert her thoughts. Would there be any chance of John returning for the wedding? It was to be the last day of April. She hoped his friend was better. She was so sorry for him having to rush off and leave Carmella.

Somehow her letter did John good; it breathed sympathy and help. He got on his horse again, and returned home as quickly as possible. It was one of Charlie's bad days, and it was on his conscience that he ought not to have left him. He rallied again, but the weariness and restlessness were very great, and most distressing to watch.

The end came very suddenly and swiftly two nights after. He had seemed better, and John, who was greatly exhausted by much watching, was just thinking he might take a night's rest, as he seemed easier, but went back once more to his friend's bed to find him almost gasping for breath. John called the servant, and between them they

raised him, and tried to give him ease. It was piteous to see him. Once or twice he opened his eyes, and John thought that he wished to say something.

"Is there anything you want, Charlie? What is it?" he asked, as he bent over him.

But only a broken whisper came in answer. "So good—to me—always, John—thank you."

And a few minutes later his tired body had ceased to struggle, and John was only conscious of a great thankfulness that the weariness and restlessness were over, and he was at peace.

But he had lost the best friend ever man had. They had fought a hard battle together for many years, and the bond between them had been very strong. When often he had despaired, Charlie's unfailing spirits and cheerfulness had carried them through many dark days, and now he was gone! The last few weeks he had been with him, but before

that he had lain there, week after week, alone, struggling with death. John found that thought very hard to bear. He did not go to bed; he sat through the night in a chair in the sitting-room, and there Winter found him in the early morning when he rode over.

He saw by John's face what had happened. George Winter had a very good heart, though he was what people call a rough diamond. He walked to the window, and remained silently there for some moments; then he came back to the fire where John was sitting.

"Come back with me," he said abruptly; "you look thoroughly done up. It will be much better for you than sitting alone here."

John shook his head. "No, thank you, George. It's awfully good of you, but I must stay here. I am going back to England immediately, and there is so much to do."

He, too, got up and walked across to the window.

"Perhaps," he said, after a pause—"perhaps you will come to see me sometimes. That will be kind of you." He sat down again. "It is the silence of death which is so terrible, I think, George. I keep on listening for sounds in the next room, and nothing comes."

"You're overdone," answered George. "You had much better do as I say, and come back with me."

"No." John thanked him again, but would not go; and George left him.

Two days later they buried Charlie Finley in the little churchyard some miles away; it surrounded the small wooden church built by one of the ranchers five years ago. John, with others, was present, and, being on the road to Melbourne, went down there, and the next day attended Mass, which was a great source of comfort to him, and bridged over the thousands of miles which lay between him and Carmella. He almost felt she was kneeling beside him, and he left the church with hope once more strong with him. On

the way back from Melbourne he met the doctor who had attended Charlie, and they talked together for some minutes.

"Take care of yourself," the doctor said in parting, "or you will certainly have a breakdown. If you take my advice, you will go straight home to England, and throw off all worries. You've been overdone."

As he rode home, John told himself it was quite true. He was overdone. He had felt a strange dizziness in his head the last three days; he would go home. He had intended to catch the next mail, anyhow; but he really thought he would catch the boat to-morrow, and, if necessary, come back with Carmella to finish business. Ah! this was the twenty-second of March. He might be with Carmella by the middle of May. Yes; he had made up his mind—he would go.

But that night he was feverish, restless, and uneasy, and when the servant went to him in the morning, he was talking so strangely and wildly, that he sent off hastily

for George Winter; and before night his old enemy, brain fever, had taken hold of him, and for a week he lay wrestling with it. Not a really bad attack, the doctor said, and, fortunately, taken in time. But it was five weeks before he was convalescent or had recovered sufficiently to attempt the journey back. When he was recovering, they gave him his letters—one from Carmella amongst them. She wrote in great distress. Monsignor Carnal had caught a bad chill on his way from England to Rome, and had died a week after his arrival there. Carmella wrote she had not seen him; she was so unhappy; she had lost her best friend, her truest adviser. John, too, she knew would feel it; he had always been such a friend to him—so fond of him.

The letter threw him back again. Monsignor Carnal had been a good friend to him. It had been through him partly their engagement had been brought about; and John felt, too, that Carmella had no one with her to

console and sympathize with her. He began to fret and to grow so restless that the doctor, in despair, thought he had better let him go. The sea voyage would be the best thing possible for him—the rest and monotony of it—and, much to John's relief, he gave his consent, he and George Winter accompanying him down to see him off. He felt sure he had done right, for the difference in John even during the last two days was remarkable; the worried, anxious look in his eyes disappeared, and he both ate and slept better. They all three stood on the deck of the steamer together.

"I am awfully grateful to you both," John said. "You've been more than kind to me."

"Look here," said the doctor, turning round suddenly to him; "take care of yourself. Take everything easy, and don't worry. That's my parting injunction. Good-bye."

The bell for going on shore rang. Winter grasped his hand.

"Good-bye, old chap. We shall miss you

very much. If I can sell the property for you, I will; though it will be bad luck not to see you here again."

The two moved away, John accompanying them to the gangway; the anchor was pulled up, the great ship glided out.

Dr. Downey and Winter watched it till it was almost out of sight.

"What do you think?" George asked him, as they turned away.

"I think," he answered, in a decisive tone of voice, "he will get quite well; and, if all goes right, there is no reason why he should have any return of it. But if he has a shock, or anything goes wrong with him—mind you, it must be something really bad—then I should be much afraid for his brain. But I hope to God this won't happen. I have warned him."

The two said good-bye and separated, as their roads lay in different directions.

XXI.

HILDA had arrived in London the day before Carmella had left for Rome, and, anxious to please John, she had gone the same evening to Eaton Square. Carmella had welcomed her warmly, and thanked her again and again for coming. She had missed John so much. It had been so sudden; she had hardly realized it all before he was gone. Hilda sympathized, told her it must have been bad indeed for them both, and impressed upon Carmella, as much as she dared, the intensity of his devotion, and even hinted slightly at the responsibility she had incurred in letting him care for her. She had never got over the original conviction that Carmella would not marry John. Even now, here, listening to her, hearing of her great affection for him, still the skeleton of doubt was always present,

though Ralph was always reproaching her for her pessimism; and, indeed, she told herself it was really ridiculous. But still, the conviction could not be got rid of. She did not see Carmella again after that evening, as they left for Rome the next day.

Lady Catherine had accompanied Hilda to London, and the latter had hoped great things from the change. But to her disappointment neither place nor time seemed to make any difference. It appeared to have taken all life, all energy, from her. She was content to sit for hours quite still, a book or her work on her lap, but her thoughts far away, her lips sometimes unconsciously moving, Hilda felt certain in prayers for John. She did everything she could for her mother. Perhaps they were never so near together as in those dark days of Lady Catherine's; but it was hopeless, and Hilda was in despair. She had come to the conclusion that her mother was a terrible warning against the setting up of idols. She had idolized John, and her idol

had crumbled—suddenly, all in a moment—and nothing was left to her.

Meanwhile the days flew on. Judith Travers was constantly with Hilda, helping her in choosing her trousseau, suggesting, and insisting upon many extravagances. Hilda noticed once or twice that she was very silent and absent, and remarked on it to her.

"Perhaps I am," Judith had said. "Anyhow, it doesn't matter, and you will know some day." And with that Hilda had to be content. But one morning she got, amongst her letters, one from Judith.

"My old Dearest" (it ran),

"Don't scream as you read this, but I am going to China to-day. It's quite true and it's quite horrible. I know the ship will go to the bottom, and one of the sailors says there is every appearance of a storm. I am sitting in a cabin like a prison, writing this to you. I couldn't tell you before, because if I had begun to talk of it, I should

never have had courage to start. There is a lady on board with short hair and stiff collars, but she's been to China six times, and she says if I am frightened I may come and sleep in her cabin. Oh, dear, I hear them rattling the anchor! The boat looks so thin, but one of the officers says it's a very big one. Anyhow, if I am drowned, you will always say I tried to do what I ought, won't you? It was that night of the ball at Mardale when I began to know I was very heartless and selfish. I think it was all the kind people there who made me feel it, especially Lord Empill. You can tell him one day. Now, Hilda, good-bye. I am miserable at not being at your wedding. Don't put it off if I am drowned. I shall never come back to England, because, even if I get there, I could never get back again. Good-bye.

"JUDITH.

"P.S.—It is a surprise visit to Jim. Do you think he will like it? I suppose I shall have to wear a pigtail and shut up my eyes!"

Hilda's breath was almost taken away. Judith gone to China! The world must be coming to an end. She laughed long over the letter, and then she cried a little. There was something infinitely pathetic as well as humorous in it; but Judith had found her heart—of that there was no doubt—and it must be a large, loving one to make her face the thing she was most terrified of in life. Poor little thing! Hilda felt quite distressed, thinking of her probable fears. She told Lady Catherine, hoping it might perhaps interest her; but Hilda saw, as was generally the case now, that she was barely listening. This curious apathy almost alarmed her at times. She had even wished to postpone her wedding as she did not like to leave her mother, but when she approached the subject, Lady Catherine had been obdurate.

"My dear," she had said, "I am always alone now; no one can help me. Indeed, I think it is best when I am alone, as then I need not make an effort."

So Hilda gave it up. They had settled to live near Mardale, as Lord Empill could not spare Ralph; so a small house in the grounds had been got ready for them. It it was very fortunate for Ralph's cause that all this had taken place. The fact of John's difficulties, the unrestful state of his affairs, had made Hilda thankful for the sense of rest and security which her engagement with Ralph had given her. Every day she realized this more; and one day, much to his delight, she told him she shuddered to think what happiness she had nearly missed.

So the days went. apace, and they were married on a bright spring morning. Hilda, in her white gown, with a large bouquet of white violets—she would consent to no other flowers—was a picture of a bride; and Ralph, as he left the church with her, felt that, though his happiness had tarried, it had come to him at last. And they had nothing to regret.

Mary Empill was there, her mind filled with

John. She had heard nothing for certain—everything had been kept so religiously secret—but she suspected strongly that there was an understanding between him and Carmella. She wished she knew. Anything, she told herself, would be better than this agony of suspense. If it was an accomplished fact, she might make up her mind to try and face it; but she, too, like Lady Catherine, hoped to the end.

XXII.

THE fog had been heavy as they entered the English Channel, and the ship was four hours later at Southampton than she had expected to be. John took it very quietly; he was in no hurry. He intended to start for Italy the following evening, so he had twenty-four hours' margin to allow himself. The voyage had done wonders for him; he was almost himself again, except that his headaches were perhaps more frequent.

It was seven o'clock when they landed, and he went to the hotel, dined, and caught an 8.30 train up to London. There was no fog inland. It was a glorious summer's evening, not even too hot; and he was almost beside himself with joy that this seemingly endless separation had come to an end. In three

days, he hoped, he would see Carmella, and, he trusted, never part from her again. He knew, too, he would find a letter in Grosvenor Street awaiting him. It was eight long weeks since he had heard, and he was longing for it. He had posted one to her on his way home, when the ship had touched land, and now it was his turn. Perhaps there might even be more than one for him.

He jumped into a hansom at Waterloo, and drove to Grosvenor Street. The house, he knew, was unoccupied, as Lord Empill and Mary had gone north a week before. He rang the bell. The hall porter answered it; John, in reply to the man's question, said he had had dinner, and went on into the smoking-room, where, amongst several others, was a letter from Carmella. He tossed the rest aside one by one. There was one, he saw, from the Duchessa—it did not strike him as odd she should write—but it would keep. He threw himself into a chair, turned on the little electric lamp, and opened it. There was

no one to see the sudden change, the blank in his face, as he read. He never moved till he got to the end; then he got up, and looked wildly round the room, ran his fingers through his hair, then took it up once more, and read it again.

It ran as follows:—

"Oh, John, how can I tell you? And yet I must tell you, and no one else; and for days I have tried to take up my pen, but I could not. For you love me, and I love you. Yes; always believe that; but I cannot marry you. God has called me—called me so truly, so strongly, I cannot disobey. For I should be doing you a great injury if I married you. You will, perhaps, think I am doing you a great wrong now; but it would be far, far worse if I had married you, for in doing that I should have destroyed both our souls. But yet I know you will find it hard to forgive me; but go I must. All that time in London, when I thought I could marry you, I must

have been under a spell; the convent grew fainter, and your love, and the life with you, filled up my heart, and at last I saw nothing else. And then, when I came back to Rome, I went to the convent, just to tell them that I was not going. In the little chapel Benediction was being sung, and through it all God was calling me, telling me I belonged to Him alone, and that I had been unfaithful to my vow and to my own life. I prayed our Blessed Lady to intercede for my forgiveness, to help me in my great trouble. Then I came away. The nuns said nothing to me—they did not reproach me; they were so kind and gentle—but I saw that they, too, thought I had broken my life vow. Then, John, I came back, and I wrestled with myself—my love for you; but ever and ever I heard God calling me, and it grew stronger and stronger, and to-morrow the convent will receive me, and some months later I take the veil. But, John, for you, *mio caro*, my heart is very sore. My best friend, lover, my true heart,

I am sitting here thinking of you, and I am raining tears on this letter. To-day I may love you still—to-morrow I must put it away; but it dies hard. If I could have seen you once more; but then—no; I could not bear it. You must think of me as one much loving and much loved, but dead.

"Good-bye, good-bye.

"CARMELLA."

John read it through. He looked at it again, and he wondered if he was dreaming some horrible dream, and would presently wake. Then, man-like, he realized that it was no dream—fact of the sternest kind confronted him, and he had suddenly come face to face with life in its bitterest and most hopeless form. He did not grasp it all at once; it seemed so impossible. He did not know how he had been sailing in fair weather all these months, and how the storm had come with desperate, concentrated force. If he had been a younger man, the passion of despair, the

hopelessness and futility of battling against fate, would have driven him that moment to something desperate; but being older, combined with an extraordinarily simple nature, the intense bitterness of the injury which had been done him did not come to him then. He walked to the window, drew up the blinds, and stood there with his eyes fixed on the streets. The London season was at its height; carriages to parties and balls were crowding along. The constant restlessness of the street appealed to him, and for the moment soothed him. Now and then, among the foot passengers, some, attracted by the light within, looked up. He could see some sad, tired faces, and he wondered vaguely if any of them were suffering like him. He went over it all, while he schooled himself to bear the intense agony which the reminiscences brought. He saw Carmella again and again as he had seen her in life, as she had come to him with her great beauty and her wonderful seriousness. His thoughts drifted to the ball at

Garvagh House. He held his breath as he seemed again to touch her hand; even the scent of the violets he thought was there. She had told him that night she had cared, and in this very room he had given himself up to an ecstasy of hope. On and on he passed through it all—that day he had kissed her first, the wonderful look on her face. And then the parting—so sad, yet so full of hope—her last words; and now, all had gone. With one small letter—he held it tight—she had scattered it as if it had never been. It had been swept away, and all was as before. But what of him? She was as dead to him as if he had seen her die; she had left him with his life stranded, his hopes shattered, his heart broken. Ah! had his mother suffered anything like this? Then, indeed, now she was avenged. The curious thing was through it all the bitterness did not supervene, neither towards Carmella, nor towards the religion which she had given to him. Perhaps, knowing that she had loved him, and yet knowing

that it was for religion that she had failed him, inspired him with an awe towards the religion which could sweep away all earthly love and ties. And as he sat there through the short June night, slowly did the strong man's heart break. At last it was too much; the words came from him very slowly, but forced themselves into words, and he spoke out loud.

"I don't think," he said—"I don't think I can bear it."

But nothing came to help him. The pictures looked down sadly and quietly from their places on the wall. There was nothing human in touch with his great loneliness and sorrow, nothing but the ceaseless roar of the streets; they even were far away. No one knew, and, in his misery, he told himself, no one cared. Mind and body were worn out. He felt he could not think any more; he was weak from his long illness. He looked absently at the clock, and saw it was three o'clock. The dawn of the June morning was breaking,

and the streets had become somewhat quieter. He stumbled upstairs, and threw himself on to his bed without undressing, his physical powers so exhausted that his brain refused even to think. He was barely conscious even of the great calamity which had befallen him.

The servant was much astonished, when he called him at half-past nine, to find he had not even undressed. He found him seated at the table writing a telegram.

"Andrew," he said—and the old man noticed the intense weariness in his face and voice—"will you send this telegram as soon as it is convenient? I am going north by the one o'clock train; please don't unpack anything more."

He talked as if speech was difficult, and he paused several times, even in this short sentence. As soon as the man was gone, he put his things together. He did it all mechanically, and moved as a man in his sleep. He went downstairs, and walked into the sitting-room. Breakfast was laid. He went up to the table,

poured himself out some tea, and took up the cup; but he put it down untasted, left the room, and, taking his hat, went out.

The fresh morning air cooled his aching head. He wandered into that part of the Park given up to the children at that hour, and sat down on a bench. A child came quite close to him, and stretched out her little hand —she saw he was in trouble—but he did not see her. If he had, the human touch might have saved him. He stayed there with his head in his hands, thinking, always thinking of the one subject—Carmella—Carmella, who was alive, who was in the same world as himself, and yet was worse than dead. Could he bear it? Could he, he asked himself, live, if this pain continued? What should he do? How should he live out his life?

He got up at last and moved homewards. He found the cab was at the door, and he got into it, gave Andrew a handshake which astonished the old man, and told the cabman to go to Euston. The porter, as he locked

the door and put up the shutters, shook his head, and said he was sure there was something amiss.

John got into the train going north, and sat immovable in his corner. The heat was very great, but he did not notice it. A man and his wife, who were travelling in the same compartment, noticed the piteous misery in his face; and the woman, with the bold confidence of her sex, afterwards expressed her opinion that it was the face of a man who was on the verge of insanity.

Meanwhile John gathered together his belongings as the train neared Wyburn. As he emerged from the station, he noticed the Mardale dog-cart was in waiting for him. The groom handed him a note in Mary's handwriting. He got into the carriage without waiting to see what was in it, and opened it as they drove along. Mary wrote to say there had been a slight fire in the kitchen at Burton, and therefore Lady Catherine was staying at Mardale, and John was

expected there too. It didn't make much difference, he thought; any place would be the same. All he seemed now to feel was that he must have rest at any cost.

The evening was a lovely one, the whole country revelling in its lovely June green. It was past nine o'clock when he left Wyburn, but daylight, though the moon was trying to force its light over the dying day. The mountains were still quite blue, and there was just a slight summer breeze stirring gently in the trees. In a moment his thoughts flew back to his home-coming nine months ago. Only nine months! Was it possible he had lived all his life in that time? Good and bad alike had been crowded into those months. He had known what life might be, and now he was knowing what it was. He had driven then along this road, unconsciously going to meet his fate. Fate had pursued him, and this was the end of all. His thoughts began to get mixed, his exhausted body and brain refused to work, and it was with

a supreme effort he gathered himself together as they drove up the lime avenue, and drew up at the door. There seemed to be a blaze of light, and he shrank from it.

The butler came forward, and told him Lady Mary and his lordship were on the terrace. Would Mr. Brewster go there? He did not take in what was being said, but he followed his guide through the corridor, and out by the oak door on to the terrace. Mary came to meet him. He could see by the fast fading daylight that she had a white gown on. She asked him if he would have dinner; he shook his head. She led him to a long garden-seat a little way down the terrace, close to the large open doors which led into the hall. There was very little light now, but she thought he looked tired—more she could not see. He sat down, and she sat opposite him. He was so silent, she began to think something was the matter. The silence continued. Sounds from the distance came to them—the flap of the swans'

wings in the water below, the soft cooing of the wood pigeons, the sounds of voices in the distance—Lord Empill and his guests at the other end of the terrace.

At last Mary could bear it no longer. "John," she said, "shall I tell Hilda you are here? Aunt Catherine has gone to bed, as she has had a headache all day, and Hilda has gone in to play the organ."

"No, no"—his voice expressed intense fatigue—"not yet. You can tell her presently. Let me rest; I am so tired." And again there was silence between them.

Presently he moved, and his eyes fell on the little table near.

"Is that coffee?" he asked. "Will you give me some?"

Mary rose, poured it out, and gave it to him. Even by the twilight she could see his hand was shaking as he took it.

He drank it off eagerly, and pushed the cup away from him. Mary waited. Suddenly the moon came out from the light summer

cloud, and threw its full radiance on to his face. By its light Mary saw it for the first time. She was shocked and startled.

"John"—she leant towards him with gentle insistence—"you are very ill, or you are in some great trouble."

He did not answer for a moment; then he looked at her.

"Yes," he answered slowly, "I am in great trouble."

Something in his face made the next words die on her lips.

The voices were heard coming nearer.

John looked up like a hunted animal. "Don't let them," he said, with an imploring gesture which went to Mary's heart. "I could not bear to see them."

"They won't come," she said soothingly. "They are only going down to the lake."

Once more the moon went behind a cloud, and she could not see his face, except that his eyes were closed.

For some moments there was silence, and

then, through the open doors and windows, the sound of the organ came to them. It did not seem to disturb John. He sat quite still, his eyes closed. Hilda was playing very softly, very dreamily, in the darkened hall. She wandered from air to air, all her old favourites; and presently she began, still quite softly, that love-song of Grieg's which she had played to them that September evening. But as she touched the first few bars, John suddenly opened his eyes; his whole expression became one of intense suffering. He half rose to his feet, and, stretching out his hands as though to avert some catastrophe, he cried wildly, "Not that—I cannot bear it! Oh, my God!" He almost fell back into his seat, and all was a great darkness.

His brain had given way under the terrible physical and mental strain of the last twenty-four hours, and Dr. Downey's ominous prediction had been fulfilled.

XXIII.

THREE years had passed.

Mardale was looking its loveliest. It was late in May, and all the country was rich in its young green once more. The lilacs, laburnum, and azaleas were all at their best, and the whole terrace was a mass of brilliant colouring. The Duchessa Sorrinata was seated on the terrace, inhaling the scents with which the air seemed redolent—almost too heavily laden. She was engaged in writing a letter, but it seemed to be a difficult task. Several times she paused in her occupation, and once or twice she laid down her pen and sighed deeply. She seemed hardly conscious of the profusion and beauty around her; her thoughts, her eyes, were far away.

Suddenly a step on the gravel broke the

stillness. Mary Empill approached her. To the casual observer she had altered little in the last three years, save for the many streaks of grey in her brown hair, but to her intimate friends Mary had lost something in her face. The look of rest and content which had characterized her had gone since that fateful evening three years ago, when John's despairing, heartrending cry had rung in her horrified ears. Mary had lost something she would never regain; there was a look of trouble, almost of horror, in her eyes. All this time she had been trying to recover from the effect of that night. Day after day she had attempted to put it away from her. At night, when she was alone, the memory came back with all its terrors upon her, and at times life had been almost impossible. At times, too, her faith had been hard pressed. God had been cruel, she told herself; so many of their lives had been wrecked for apparently no cause. And as she came out on to the terrace this May afternoon, and saw the Duchessa's

sorrow and trouble written, too, in her face, she even felt sorry for her, and forgave her father for having brought her again to Mardale.

Mary took the seat opposite the Duchessa. For some moments no one spoke; then the latter pushed the letter she had just written across the small table which divided them.

"What is it?" Mary asked indifferently, but she did not attempt to take it up.

"I want you to read it," the Duchessa answered. "I want you to tell me if it is strong enough, forcible enough. It is no good, I know, but I felt I must write; I could not help myself."

"Is it to Carmella?" Mary spoke the name with difficulty.

The Duchessa made a gesture of assent. "I have told her at last of the wreckage, the misery, which to a great extent her selfishness, her infatuation, has brought about. I did not realize it, Mary, till I came here," she added very gravely.

Mary could not command her voice for some moments; then she spoke with her eyes fixed on the lake.

"You have seen John?"

"This morning," she answered, "we met him. Your father told me to speak to him. I did so. He seemed puzzled; he ran his fingers through his hair. That was always a habit. Do you remember?"

Did she remember? Ah, if only she could forget anything appertaining to him!

"I reminded him of my name," pursued the Duchessa, "but it did not seem to convey or to recall much to him. He begged me, however, to walk back with him. I did so. He led me into the dining-hall, which was painfully familiar to me, and then, to my horror and astonishment, he took me at once to where the picture of Carmella was hanging. Mary, why is it there? Is it not unwise?"

"No"—Mary looked at the Duchessa—"he remembered it; he asked for it constantly,

ceaselessly. Nothing would content him but to have it there."

"So your father told me, but I thought perhaps that in time he might have forgotten if he hadn't seen it. Well, he took me straight up to it, and he said, 'Did you know her? She was my wife. She was very beautiful. She died—two or three years ago. Which was it?' The puzzled look came back, and he appealed to the doctor, who was there, and he told him it was three years."

The Duchessa's voice broke; she could not trust herself to say more.

Mary spoke very quietly. "That is as it always has been. He thinks she is dead. It is much happier for him that he can think it."

"Poor boy! poor boy!" The Duchessa spoke with intense feeling; then again she pressed the letter on Mary. "Will you read it? I particularly wish you to do so."

Mary took it up. Any reopening of the always painful subject was very distasteful to

her, but she felt the Duchessa would insist. She began to read the closely written sheets.

"It is three years," she read, "since I took up my pen to write to you, since I made my final effort, my final appeal, with all my heart in it, to you, to reconsider, to renounce your intentions; all, alas! of no avail. Our lives have drifted so far apart; the shock then was so great to me, that I felt there must be a lapse of time before we could even write. To you, perhaps, who have been pursuing the even tenor of the life on which you had set your heart—to you, I say, most likely there have been no ups and downs, no changes, no sorrows. But have you ever thought of those whom you left outside when the convent gates closed upon you; of those whose lives were bound up in your life; of those who have had to bear with the glare and heat of the day? I am at Mardale. I am minded—not unreasonably, I think—to bring it before you. From me you shall know what has been

the consequence of that (to me) fatal step of yours; and although three years of convent life may have snapped and destroyed all human and earthly ties, even you, I think, will not read this letter unmoved.

"I came here prepared perhaps for changes, but never for a moment realizing the misery, the wreckage, which had been wrought. I thought of John Brewster as he left us, full of life, health, and joy. I return to find him living with a doctor, his memory gone, his brain a hopeless confusion; content, it is true, but with what a contentment! And it is you, Carmella, who have done this thing, for he has never recovered from an attack of brain fever which followed four and twenty hours after the receipt of your letter. Perhaps God, in His mercy, gave him oblivion, to save him from the terrible suffering which he had undergone. But still, the pain of it, the pathos of it! One of his delusions is that you are dead. He has the picture of you—my picture—and he passes again and

again in front of it—nothing would content him but this; and he tells all who come that it is a picture of his wife, and she is dead. Day after day he repeats this to all around him; day after day, too, he prays for the repose of your soul. For him, perhaps, all this is happiest; but for those who live with him! Think, Carmella! His mother, his poor mother, who is always there, who watches him, who drives him Sunday by Sunday to the door of the Catholic church, overcoming her prejudices, because she realizes that the service always quiets his restlessness and soothes his poor brain. The church seems to be his great comfort, so she takes him there, always leaving him at the door, coming away again with a look on her face which, I am told, would rouse the pity of the most callous. And so they live—perhaps many years are before them—he, with his unconscious, useless days; she, carrying the never-ceasing burden. The words keep coming back again and again to me, 'The only son of his mother,

and she was a widow.' Truly, Carmella, I am punished. The world—your living in the world and for it, these were my aims and objects. I come now, when it is too late, to see how pitiful, how small it all is; and, looking back as I do, it is a marvel and a great mystery to me to understand why we are allowed lightly and thoughtlessly to toy with such great responsibilities. I am crushed. I thought life held its bitterest moment when you left me; but to-day I have drunk to the veriest dregs, and the bitterness overwhelms me. Will you, too, find moments when you will think of all the sorrow, the physical and mental pain, which those few months cost, three years ago? Can time soften? Can God forgive? Ah, pray, pray, Carmella, that these ruined lives, these broken hearts, may not be placed to our account, and may God forgive me!"

Mary folded the letter up again, and put it back into the envelope before she spoke. Two large tears dropped on it and blistered it.

"One seems," she said at last, "to get to the end of everything, even sorrow. It is the hopelessness of it all which numbs me; there are days when I cannot even feel."

"With you," remarked the Duchessa, as she held out her hand for the letter, "it is different. I am only beginning to see the sorrow, and it is embittered by remorse."

Mary did not answer; her eyes were fixed on the water and the water-fowl sunning themselves on the opposite bank.

"I am going to-morrow." The Duchessa spoke in a hard, strained voice. "I feel I cannot stay here after to-day. Catherine refused to see me. I think she was right. We shall, probably, not meet again after to-morrow, Mary. Think of me as kindly as you can, and when you feel harshly disposed towards me, remember I am suffering; that I have built a hell with my own hands, and the worst purgatory which is formed is the one of one's own making."

She rose as she spoke, gathered her letter

and writing things together, and went through the open door, back into the house.

But Mary never moved. Hilda found her there half an hour after—Hilda, with the word "happiness" written over her expressive face, though now and then the tragedy in her family shadowed her too. The organ she had never touched since that night. She said she was too happy to play; it was only the unhappy who played well; that music did not now fill her life as it did. Be that as it may, the result was that the organ remained untouched for months.

"Dreaming, Mary?" She touched her shoulder.

"Ah, Hilda!" Mary started. "I was coming to you after tea. I couldn't leave the Duchessa before, and I did not dare bring her."

Hilda frowned. "No, I could not see her; at least, I could not be civil."

"She is going to-morrow," Mary observed. "I can't help being sorry for her. I dare say

it's weak of me, but she is dreadfully unhappy."

"Has she seen John?" asked Hilda, in an uncompromising voice.

Mary nodded.

"Then," proceeded Hilda, still in the same voice, "I am not surprised. Life itself could not be long enough for her repentance."

"You are very hard." Mary sighed. Something in her face touched Hilda's heart.

"Mary, forgive me. Yes, I am hard; and it is really so much worse for you. But when I see you, mother, and, above all, John, I find it hard to forgive—impossible sometimes. I feel quite wicked in my own happiness, with all your wrecked lives, and despair seizes upon me that there is no help for any of you. That thought is the hardest of all, and I keep on asking—Why, oh, why, should such things be?"

Lord Empill's voice came down the terrace, calling them in to tea.

Mary rose slowly; they walked together

along the terrace. Hilda said good-bye at the door.

"I am going," she said abruptly. "If I saw her again, it would throw me back years, and I might never forgive."

She turned as she spoke, and went away, Mary watching her down the terrace steps into the wood, and then she passed on into the hall.

The next day the Duchessa left, and she never came back to Mardale.

XXIV.

It had been a very hot May in Italy—even those who were most wedded to Rome had deserted it—and in the usually cool, shady garden of the convent, some miles outside the city, the heat, too, was intense. But it was a glorious evening. The sun was setting, and under the shadow of a great tree Carmella Torrini was sitting. She was very beautiful in her white nun's dress, almost too beautiful, and the restful Madonna look had intensified and deepened. She was resting, her hands crossed, as of old, on her lap. She had had a hard day nursing the sick, and this half-hour before vespers was her own.

To-day she had been in touch with her world of old. One woman whom she had tended had struck her as a remarkable

likeness to Lady Catherine, and memories had flooded back—memories put away, sternly renounced, three years ago. But to-day they had forced themselves upon her; to-day the thread had been very strong, and she had tried in vain to overcome them. The silence of the last three years, the sudden, curiously sudden, ending of everything in her former life, had come back to her. In spite of her resolutions, John stood before her, so real, so lifelike, that she had not been able to rid herself of the conviction that he was there. It was sin, she told herself—to think of him was a sin—but try as she would she could not overcome her thoughts; in spite of herself, she longed to hear of him; an intensely human feeling swept over her, carrying all before it, and for a brief moment she gave herself up to it.

There was a light step on the grass, and one of the nuns approached with a letter. Carmella took it absently, thanked her, and let it fall on her lap. After a few moments

she took it up, and realized that this was an unknown thing—a letter—and from her aunt. She broke the seal, and in a moment she was deep in its contents. It was the letter written at Mardale three days before. Carmella read it right through once; then she turned back and read it again, and a little cry of pain broke from her. She had so schooled herself all these years, so separated herself from all which belonged to the outer world, that this came as a great blow, a great shock. It was a curious thing with her that she had never really realized the intensity of John's devotion to her; she had not deemed such love was possible. "The pain of it, the pathos of it!" These words impressed her strongly. For a moment she blamed herself bitterly. She had never contemplated such tragedies, she had not believed such a thing could be possible; but there it was, standing before her in black and white, a horrible, living truth. It had been her selfishness, her anxious solicitude for her own soul, which had

brought them to this, and she had wilfully, willingly sacrificed them all in pursuance of her own life. Had God called her for this? Had that voice perhaps not been a true one, only the imagination of her own heart, her own wishes? She rose from her seat, and paced up and down the garden. But by-and-by she grew calmer. She heard the bell beginning to ring for Vespers: in five minutes she must go. She told herself she was not fit; she had let the world break in upon her, upon her life, upon her vows. It was a sin. Would God forgive? Then suddenly her eyes fell on the words, "The church, it quiets his restless longing." Ah, God be praised! It became suddenly clear to her. His body, his poor body—yes, it was sad, very sad, all this suffering; but his soul, that was safe, and the other was of little consequence as compared with that. There was even an ecstasy in the thought that she had been the means of saving his soul. "The church seems to be his great comfort." The words seemed to be

ringing in her brain; she repeated them to herself, and, as she went towards the chapel, the troubled look passed entirely from her face, and once more the spiritual expression rested on it. She passed up the chapel to her own seat, and on her knees she thanked God for His goodness, His mercy. All else was swallowed up in this supreme thought as she knelt there. When the service was over, and with the other nuns she left the chapel, there was a look of ineffable joy and peace in her face, hardly of this world.

And so we leave them. They were but some of the many atoms, a few members of struggling humanity, which go to make up the whole. The allotted fourscore years, so endless to the finite mind, are in reality so momentary, so fleeting. Thousands are pressing on, treading in each other's steps, all passing on to the same goal, strong with the sense of life here—life there—all to be gathered into a great Hereafter. There the

mysteries of life—love—pain—death, will be solved, and through all, above all, is the power of that endless life, carrying its power from the beginning to that end which has no end—triumphant—infinite—eternal.

THE END.

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